SPECIAL DOUBLE ISSUE

Asimov's SCIENCE FICTION

OCTOBER/
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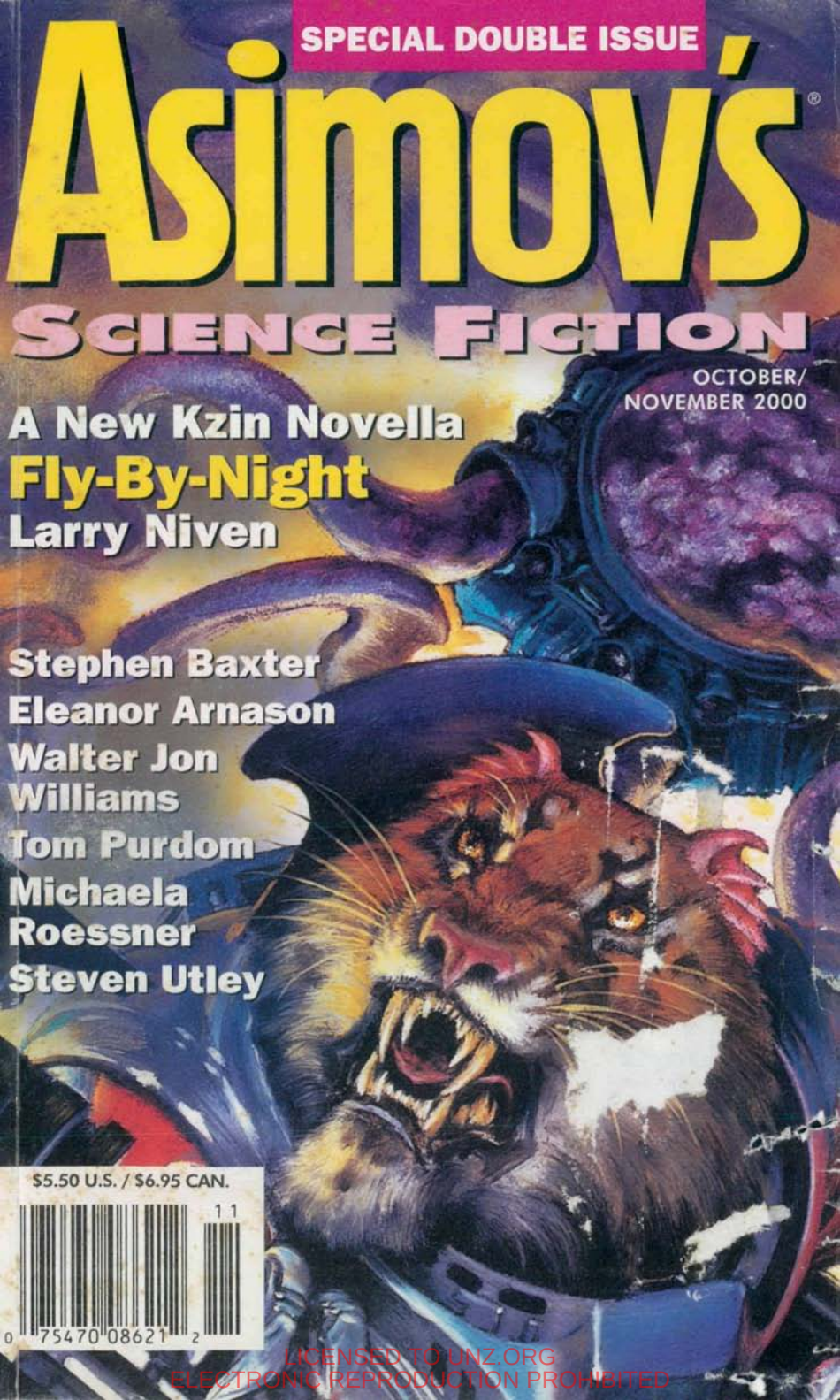

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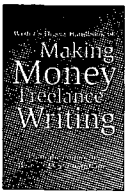

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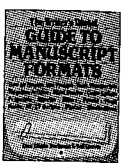

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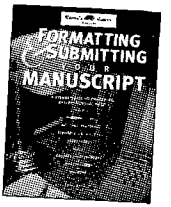

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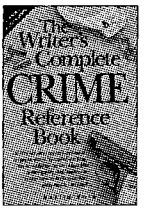

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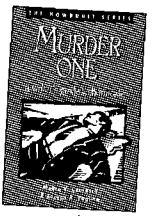

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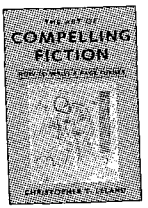

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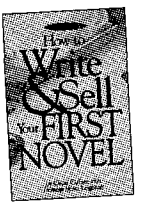

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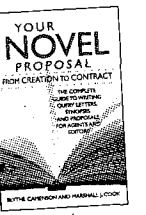

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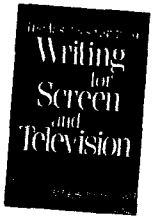

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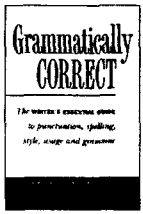

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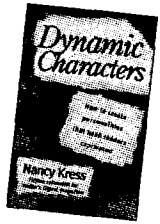

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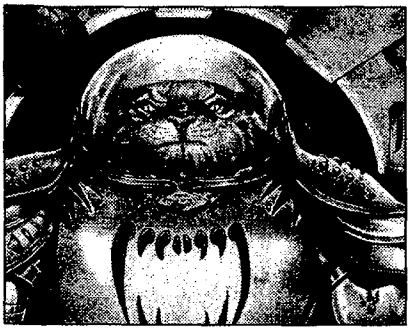

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

Guest of Honor

This issue will be coming out around the time the fifty-eighth World Science Fiction Convention is held in Chicago. The Worldcon is the great annual jamboree of the science-fiction world, the Labor Day festival where writers and editors and readers get together, Hugo awards are given out, and prominent members of our community are chosen as honored guests. This year's Guests of Honor are the well-known writer Ben Bova (who carried off a slew of Hugos in his days as editor of *Analog* and later of *Omni*), artist Bob Eggleton, he of the matchless hair and many Hugos, and publisher/editor Jim Baen of Baen Books.

I always pay close attention to the Guest of Honor choices. I think being a Worldcon Guest of Honor is one of the two most significant marks of acclaim one can receive in our field, the other being the Grand Master award of the Science Fiction Writers of America (about which more next month). Such awards as Hugos and Nebulas are transient things, given for individual pieces of work; Worldcon Guests of Honor and SFWA Grand Masters are being singled out for a lifetime of extraordinary achievement.

In modern times, alas, being a Worldcon Guest of Honor is not quite the gaudy thing it used to be. You still get your expenses paid, and a splendid suite to stay in, and your photograph and biography in the program book, and all of that. But conventions nowadays have four or five or even more Guests of Honor a year—a writer, an editor, an artist, sometimes a "media" guest, whatever that is. In the olden days there would be just one GoH, who might be an artist or an editor or, more usually, a writer, and that one person was the focus of all eyes throughout the weekend. The modern system, necessary though it is, dilutes the impact.

Conventions were much smaller events back then, too—just a few hundred attendees, or at most a thousand, whereas today they run to five thousand or more. The highlight of the convention, the Hugo ceremony, had the format of a Saturday night banquet in which the Guest of Honor made a major after-dinner speech just before the awards were given out. Everyone was there; everyone listened raptly to what the GoH had to say. Today the Hugo banquet is no more, and the Guest of Honor speeches themselves have been separated from the evening awards ceremony and are tucked away at odd times during the afternoon, so that you have to make a special attempt to find them. I regret that. It subtracts mightily from the glory of being Guest of Honor.

That glory has been conferred in interesting ways, over the years. We have had, for example, only two three-time honorees, and they are exactly the people you would have expected. Robert A. Heinlein, who at the age of thirty-four had made himself, within two years, the dominant science fiction writer of the age, was GoH at the Denver convention in 1941; he was picked again in 1961, at Seattle, and yet again for the 1976 Kansas City convention. And

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John W. Campbell, Jr., that towering figure among editors, was honored in 1947 in Philadelphia, in 1954 in San Francisco, and again in 1957 in London. (The Londoners didn't care, in that pre-jet-travel age, that Campbell had had the honor just a few years before. That San Francisco convention might just as well have been on the moon, for them, and they wanted their own glimpse of him!) I don't know which is the more extraordinary feat: to be tapped three times in eleven years, as Campbell was, or to reach across three and a half decades, as Heinlein did.

A few writers have been chosen twice. Robert Bloch, not yet famed as the author of *Psycho* but much beloved by SF fans, was GoH in Toronto in 1948, and then again—also Toronto—in 1973. Fritz Leiber was chosen by New Orleans in 1951 and Brighton, England, in 1979. Brian Aldiss has had two shots, London in 1965, Brighton (with Leiber) in 1979. Clifford Simak was named in 1971 (Boston) and again in 1981 (Denver).

Unsurprisingly, the early Guests of Honor were titanic figures, now almost mythical. The very first one (New York, 1939) was Frank R. Paul, the cover artist for Hugo Gernsback's pioneering magazines, and a man of enormous ebullience and charm. (Gernsback himself was Chicago's GoH in 1952.) The second convention (Chicago, 1940) picked E.E. "Doc" Smith, the author of the classic Lensman series; Heinlein was next, and in 1946, in Los Angeles after the wartime hiatus, A.E. van Vogt, chosen in tandem with his wife, the writer E. Mayne Hull. (There have been several subsequent husband-wife choices—Leigh Brackett and Edmond Hamilton in Oakland in 1964, Damon Knight and Kate Wilhelm in Boston in 1980—and one pair of brothers,

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Arkady and Boris Strugatsky of Russia (Brighton, 1987.)

Since Guests of Honor are chosen not by popular vote but by the small group of SF fans who actually run each year's conventions, there have been oddities and injustices. Nobody got around to Ray Bradbury until Atlanta in 1983. Alfred Bester was practically on his deathbed when he was chosen for the 1987 Brighton convention, and was unable to attend. Such great writers as Hal Clement (Chicago, 1991) and Jack Vance (Orlando, 1992) had been writing more than forty years before they were finally honored, Frederik Pohl (Los Angeles, 1972) more than thirty, and Jack Williamson (Miami Beach, 1977) close to fifty. In contrast, my own turn (Heidelberg, Germany, 1970) came when I was only thirty-five years old and in the second decade of my career, and though I was delighted to be picked, it astounded me to have been selected ahead of such great figures as Pohl, Vance, Clement, Bradbury, and Williamson.

I've been to all but a few of the fifty-eight Worldcons, and I've seen some extraordinary Guest of Honor performances. Right at the top is the stunt Robert Heinlein pulled in Seattle in 1961, when he invited *the entire convention* to a cocktail party in his suite. There were only three hundred people at that convention, but it was a phenomenal thing, all the same, to see the legendary Heinlein holding court (in his bathrobe, and Heinlein looked more distinguished in a bathrobe than almost any other man would in a tuxedo) and playing bartender as well for an army of goggle-eyed readers.

Then there was the time when Philip José Farmer, who was Guest of Honor in Berkeley, California, during the revolutionary year of 1968, decided to turn his Guest of Honor speech at the Hugo banquet into an elaborate proposal for transforming the world into Utopia. It was my misfortune to be toastmaster at that banquet, conducted during a rare Berkeley heat wave. I had to remain on stage throughout the whole interminable event: Phil went on and on and on, speaking for what felt like days, and many of us began to wonder if we'd survive long enough to see the Hugos handed out.

This was just the opposite of what had happened the year before in New York. That convention's Guest of Honor was the normally loquacious Lester del Rey; but Lester, infuriated by an overlengthy and strikingly non-amusing speech delivered just prior to his, tore up what probably would have been a fiery hour-long rant, replaced it with just a few curt, chilly sentences, and sat down.

I don't think anyone ever enjoyed being Guest of Honor more than Isaac Asimov (Cleveland, 1955). That was one of the smaller conventions—only about four hundred attendees—and Isaac, who was thirty-five years old then and full of vitality, was all over the place, hugging people, introducing himself to astonished strangers, improvising limericks, singing Gilbert & Sullivan. At the end of the convention he announced that he would be willing to accept the title of Guest of Honor Emeritus and repeat the performance at every subsequent convention, and perhaps he would have, except that the following year's Guest of Honor, in New York, was a formidable rival in the ego department, the redoubtable Arthur C. Clarke, who managed quite effectively to keep the spotlight on himself, rather than the self-appointed Guest of Honor Emeritus.

Then there was the year (the Hague, 1990) when there were three Guests of Honor, Harry Harrison, Joe Haldeman, and the German editor/writer Wolfgang Jeschke, all of

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whom had conspicuous gray beards. That was their only real point of similarity, but people who had never met them before were confusing them all weekend. (Haldeman shaved his beard off soon afterward and no one will ever mistake him for Harry Harrison again.)

And Harlan Ellison, in 1978, Phoenix: he did it the Harlan way, of course, setting up a plastic tent in the lobby of the hotel and spending the weekend writing a story out in public. It was posted, page by page, as he turned it out, and at the end of the convention Ben Bova bought it for *Omni*. (Harlan was also having a political quarrel with the state of Arizona that year, and since he was boycotting Arizona hotels and restaurants, he came to the convention in a rented camper, in which he slept and ate throughout the entire weekend.)

Nor will I forget Samuel L. Clemens—that's right, Mark Twain—who was the official *Ghost* of Honor at the 1993 San Francisco convention. Jon DeCles, in appropriate costume, "channeled" him for the convention-goers.

That was a clever stunt, though I'm glad it hasn't been repeated. Nevertheless, it saddens me to think of the writers who missed their turns because death took them too soon—people such as Frank Herbert, Cyril Kornbluth, Philip K. Dick, Fletcher Pratt. Avram Davidson would have made a wonderful Guest of Honor, and—startling thought!—probably L. Ron Hubbard would have, too. And there are other fine writers, still living, who have been mysteriously neglected in the great GoH lottery as well. They know who they are. I hope some future convention committee does also.

And *you*—fifteen years old, reading this now, dreaming of the day when your first story is published—can it be that you will be one of the Guests of Honor at the 2030 Worldcon? I certainly hope so, and that I'm there to shake your hand when you come up to remind me of this column. I'll be glad to meet you. Maybe we can go off to the bar for a drink together. Hell, I won't even be a hundred yet. O

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On the Net

James Patrick Kelly

KID STUFF

Emergency, emergency!

There has been a lot of hand-wringing of late by science fiction professionals over kid literacy. We can't boldly go where no genre has gone before without *Readers, The Next Generation*. What does it mean for the future of this magazine if seventh-graders are too busy twitching characters through Playstation dungeons to read our stories? And when they do read, how come they seem to be choosing media-related spin-offs, just marking time until their favorite TV show comes on again or the next sci-fi blockbuster opens on three screens down at the Tenplex? Could it be that *Asimov's* is obsolete? That the novellas and novelettes gracing these pages will soon go the way of slide rules and eight-track tapes? That science fiction, the literature of the future, has passed its expiration date? *Danger, Stan Robinson. Danger!*

Being SF pros, we partake in some small measure in the proud, can-do tradition of engineering. We like to think we can redesign what is outmoded and fix what has broken. Okay, so instruments detect multiple breaches in the hull of Starship Science Fiction; our precious audience is leaking into the cold vacuum of popular culture. We ask ourselves, what would Heinlein do? Go where the trouble is and start patching like crazy! So it is that there have been calls for publishers to crank out more young adult titles and for science fiction writers to go into the schools and make the case for our genre in person. One particularly outspoken advocate of this approach is **David Brin** <*http://www.kithrup.com/brin/*>, who in conjunction with our sister magazine *Analog*, recently announced **The Webs of Wonder Contest** <*http://www.analogsf.com/wow/*>. WOW "will hand out a $1,000 cash first prize—plus runner-up awards—for excellent new sites on the World Wide Web that unite a love of learning with a passion for good stories, using science fiction to complement subjects that today's students face in the classroom." Un-

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fortunately, the deadline for the contest will have passed by the time you read this, but it is billed as the "First Annual," so better luck next year. Meanwhile, the site will provide an excellent resource for teachers and students.

But are the schools where the problem really is?

For years, the **National Endowment for the Arts** <*http://arts.endow.gov/*> has funded a program that brings working artists into our nation's classrooms. Each state has a juried roster of actors, painters, poets, sculptors, musicians, dancers, storytellers and the like, who visit schools for multiday residencies to share their art. And yes, there is at least one science fiction writer doing this work. My first residency was in 1986 and since then I have been in more than sixty schools, talked to literally thousands of K-12 students and eaten more bad lunches than I care to remember.

Now my residencies aren't about *teaching* science fiction exactly, they're about *writing* it. I get my kids to think about what school might be like in the future, what they'd actually do with a time machine, why aliens would want to contact us or what it would feel like to have wetware. Then they write the story or poem or play. As I said, I've been doing this for fourteen years and I think my job has gotten easier, not harder, in that time. I find that kids today wrap their minds around relativity, world building and causality paradoxes more adroitly than they used to. And, of course, we are talking about the most computer-and-net-literate generation in history. I think they get science fiction because they are living it. They recognize that they are growing up in a world that has some scary SF problems and glorious sense-of-wonder opportunities.

I regret that kids today don't read as much as my generation, but they *do* read. Remember that the boomers were the first television generation; *we* didn't read as much as the generation before us. Print of all kinds may be in something of a slump (have you talked to newspaper folks recently?) but it is unlikely to fail and will certainly never go extinct. It enjoys far too many natural advantages over its multimedia competitors, not the least of which is that all multimedia starts as words on a page. I believe that there will be a dazzling selection of science fiction magazines and books in the future, although most of them won't be tree ware. And, although I applaud and encourage efforts by other science fiction professionals to reach out to the youth of America, I very much doubt that the classroom is where we are going to change the new broadband culture.

So anyway, the kids are all right, in my humble opinion. They're just different.

True Confessions

Or are they so different? When I was a kid, I certainly watched way too much silly science fiction on TV and was utterly enthralled by bone-stupid genre movies. I read yards of sciffy hackwork, and yes, some of it was media-related. In case you were wondering when I was going to get around to the links, not only am I about to confess the sins of my youth, I'm going to give you their URL's.

Every day when I came home from school, I'd plant myself in front of the tube to watch the doings of "A strange visitor from another planet who came to Earth with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men!" Was I the only kid who would tie a bath towel around his neck and jump up and down on the couch

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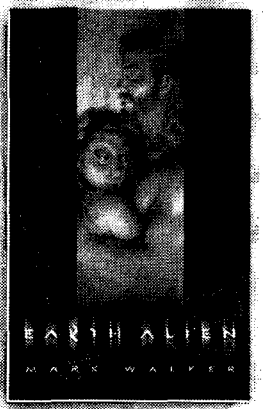

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while watching *Superman?* I think not. Probably the best tribute site to the original show is **The Adventures Continue** <*http://www.jimnolt.com/*>, which includes an episode guide, photos, and a thorough debunking of the urban legend about the untimely death of the actor who played Superman. No, George Reeves did not think he really was Superman and thus did not jump out of the window of a skyscraper in an ill-conceived attempt to fly.

As I wrote in an earlier column, I wasted a lot of time and allowance on comic books as a kid. However, I was never as taken with **DC Comics'** <*http://www.dccomics.com/*> version of Superman as I was with the TV incarnation. But even though the plots were tired and the drawing was stiff, I still gobbled up DC's product. That is, until **Marvel Comics** <*http://www.marvel.com/*> roared back to life in the early sixties. In a heartbeat, I dumped the Man of Stale for the Fantastic Four and Spider-Man. You can find an excellent online history of both Marvel and DC at **The Comic Page** <*http://www.dereksantos.com/comicpage/*>. I was so taken by the burgeoning Marvel Universe that I sat through endless half-hours of an execrable cartoon anthology called *Marvel Superheroes* that rotated episodes of **Captain America** <*http://www.pazsaz.com/capamer.html*>, **The Incredible Hulk** <*http://www.pazsaz.com/hulk2.html*>, **Iron Man** <*http://www.pazsaz.com/ironman2.html*>, **The Mighty Thor** <*http://www.pazsaz.com/thor.html*>, and **Sub-Mariner** <*http://www.pazsaz.com/submarnr.html*>. These cartoons sort of looked like the comics, but I've seen stains that were more animated.

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What was keeping me busy between bouts of trashy comics and bad TV? Several installments ago I wrote of my infatuation for the Oz series. There are so many wonderful Oz sites on the net that I can't chose just one. Instead let me point you toward the **Oz Web Ring** <*http://www.webring.org/cgi-bin/webring?ring=ozsites&id=1&list*>, which boast ninety-eight sites set in the Merry Old Land. I was still visiting Oz around this time, although I was certainly getting a little old for it. The problem was that I had long since inhaled the original fifteen titles written by L. Frank Baum and was thus left with the continuation of the series perpetrated by Ruth Plumly Thompson, disappointing books like *Grampa in Oz*, *Handy Mandy in Oz* or *Ozoplaning with the Wizard of Oz*. I kept hoping against hope that with enough practice she would finally get it. She never did. In the last Thompson book, the Wizard introduced his latest invention, the Ozoplane. Who did she think he was? Tom Swift?

Tom Swift, Jr., was the creation of The Stratemeyer Syndicate, which has a cool **Unofficial Webpage** <*http://www.stratemeyer.net/*>. Under the direction of Edward Stratemeyer, and later his daughter, Harriet Stratemeyer Adams, the syndicate was also responsible for the Bobbsey Twins, the Hardy Boys, and the Nancy Drew series. In each of the Swift books the blonde and bland boy genius created a different invention, which always somehow managed to be precisely what was needed to save the day.

In 1954, syndicate writers hired to ghostwrite as Victor Appleton II hacked out the first four volumes: *Tom Swift and his Flying Lab*, *Tom Swift and his Jetmarine*, *Tom Swift and his Rocket Ship,* and *Tom Swift and his Giant Robot*. Thereafter, James Duncan Lawrence took over the franchise and the inventions got more exotic. Lawrence loved his neologisms, inflicting such tongue twisters on innocent kids as the Space Solartron, the Electronic Retroscope, the Spectromarine Selector, and the Triphibian Atomicar.

Tom was accompanied in his adventures by his pal Bud Barclay, whose principal functions were to ask how the inventions worked and to get kidnapped. Fans of the series might get a kick out of **The Complete Tom Swift Jr. Home Page** <*http://www.smart1.net/scooper/index.html*> where webmaster Jonathan K. Cooper strains mightily to justify the rubber science behind the inventions.

Not as popular as Tom Swift but more clearly of the genre was the series Tom Corbett, Space Cadet. Check out the fine, unofficial **Tom Corbett Home Page** <*http://www.solarguard.com/tchome.htm*>. Tom Corbett had a radio show, a TV show, a comic strip, and eight books ghostwritten under the pseudonym Carey Rockwell. Alas, all Tom's media incarnations were canceled while I was still in diapers, so I knew him only through the books. In 1948 Robert Heinlein published a juvenile called *Space Cadet,* and the Corbett series was basically Heinlein's work with the serial numbers filed off. The stories dealt with three cadets in a future West Point, who tooled around the universe in their trusty rocket, Polaris. Tom was the sensible and stolid command cadet, Astro (no last name given) was the orphan Venusian farm boy who made the rocket engines purr, and Roger Manning was the fiery, wise-ass astrogator from Mars. Man, if only I could have grown up to be an astrogator instead of a science fiction writer! I thought Tom Corbett had much cooler titles than Tom Swift: *Stand By for Mars*, *Danger in Deep Space*, *The Revolt on Venus*.

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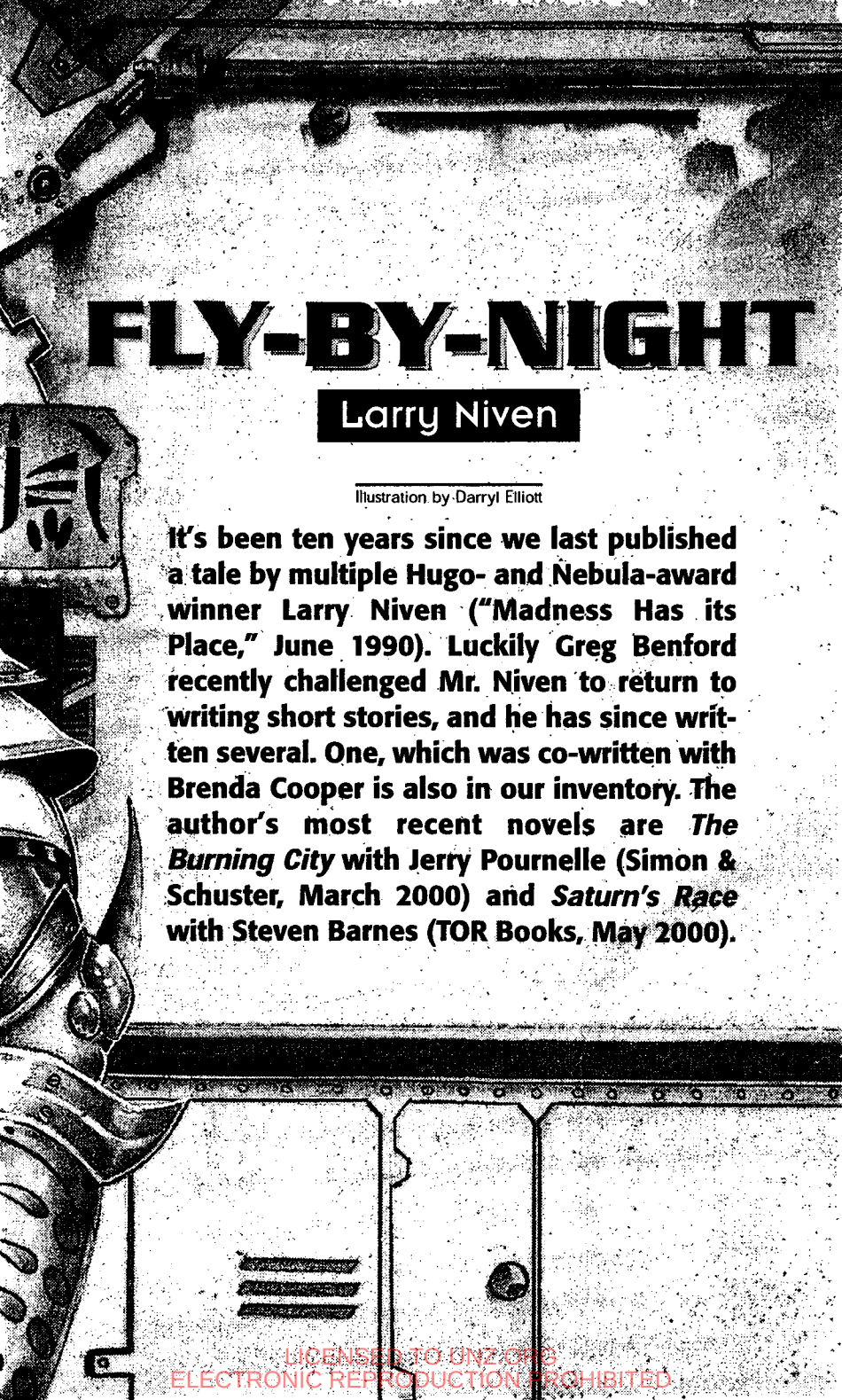

FLY-BY-NIGHT

Larry Niven

Illustration by Darryl Elliott

It's been ten years since we last published a tale by multiple Hugo- and Nebula-award winner Larry Niven ("Madness Has its Place," June 1990). Luckily Greg Benford recently challenged Mr. Niven to return to writing short stories, and he has since written several. One, which was co-written with Brenda Cooper is also in our inventory. The author's most recent novels are *The Burning City* with Jerry Pournelle (Simon & Schuster, March 2000) and *Saturn's Race* with Steven Barnes (TOR Books, May 2000).

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The windows in *Odysseus* had been skylights. The doors had become hatches. I ran down the corridor looking at numbers. Seven days we'd been waiting for aliens to appear in the ship's lobby, and nothing! Nothing until now. I felt good. Excited. I ran full tilt, not from urgency but because I *could*. I'd expected to reach Home as frozen meat in one of these Ice Class cargo modules.

I reached 36, stooped and punched the steward's bell. Just as the door swung down, I remembered not to grin.

A nightmare answered.

It looked like an octopus underwater, except for the vest. At the roots of five eel's-tail segments each four feet long, eyes looked up at me. We never see Jotoki often enough to get used to them. The limbs clung to a ladder that would cross the cabin ceiling when the gravity generators were on.

I said, "Legal Entity Paradoxical, I have urgent business with Legal Entity Fly-By-Night."

The Jotok started to say, "Business with my master—" when its master appeared below it on the ladder.

This was the nightmare I'd been expecting: five to six hundred pounds of orange and sienna fur, sienna commas marking the face, needle teeth just showing points, looking up at me out of a pit. Fly-By-Night wore a kind of rope vest, pockets all over it, and buttons or corks on the points of all ten of its finger claws.

"—is easily conducted in virtual fashion," the Jotok concluded.

What I'd been about to say went clean out of my head. I asked, "Why the buttons?"

Lips pulled back over a forest of carnivore teeth, LE Fly-By-Night demanded, "Who are you to question me?"

"Martin Wallace Graynor," I said. Conditioned reflex.

The reading I'd done suggested that a killing snarl would leave a Kzin mute, able to express himself only by violence. Indeed, his lips wanted to retract, and it turned his Interworld speech mushy. "LE Graynor, by what authority do *you* interrogate *me?*"

My antic humor ran away with me. I patted my pockets elaborately. "Got it somewhere—"

"Shall we look for it?"

"I—"

"Written on your liver?"

"I have an idea. I could stop asking impertinent questions?"

"A neat solution." Silently the door swung up.

Ring.

The Jotok may well have been posing himself between me and his enraged master, who was still wearing buttons on his claws, and *smiling*. I said, "Don't kill me. The captain has dire need of you and wishes that you will come to the main work station in all haste."

The Kzin leapt straight up with a half turn to get past the Jotok and pulled himself into the corridor. I did a pretty good backward jump myself.

Fly-By-Night asked, "Do you know why the captain might make such a request?"

"I can guess. Haste *is* appropriate."

"Had you considered using the intercom, or virtual mail?"

"Captain Preiss may be afraid they can listen to our electronics."

"They?"

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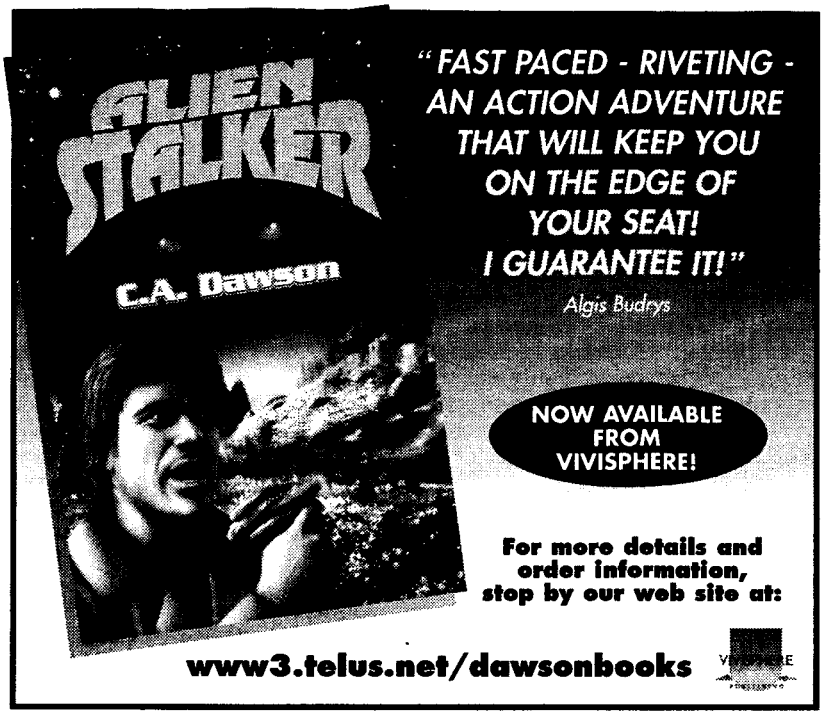
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And on the cover of each of the volumes was a credit that read "Willy Ley, Technical Advisor." Ley, of course, was one of the leading rocket experts and space propagandists of the last century.

Exit

Hey, I have to stop soon and I haven't yet confessed that three of my favorite movies as a kid were *The Crawling Eye*, *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein,* and *The Day of the Triffids.* For an amusing tour of films of this ilk, try **Stomptokyo.com's Bad Movie Report** <*http://www.stomptokyo.com/badmoviereport/*>.

Just how awful were my old faves? Consider that the late and much lamented *Mystery Science Theater* selected *The Crawling Eye* as the opener for its first season on Comedy Central. By the way, if you miss MST3000, there is help at **MSTies Anonymous** <*http://www.msties.com/index.htm*>.

But before I run out of room here, I want to make two points about this nostalgia trip I've dragged you on. One is that all of this schlock still lives on the net, which is fast becoming our cultural attic. The other is that almost everything I've written about here is . . . well . . . boy stuff. I guess that's not surprising, seeing as how I was of the boy persuasion at the time. But I wonder, how much would a girl's sentimental journey overlap with mine?

I'd be interested to hear. O

Comments on this article can be sent directly to Jim Kelly. Email him at <jim@jimkelly.net>.

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"Kzinti spacecraft. The captain hopes you can identify them and help negotiate."

He stripped off the corks and dropped them in a pocket. His lips were all right now. "This main work station, would it be a control room or bridge?"

"I'll guide you."

The Kzin was twisted over by some old injury. His balance was just a bit off. His furless pink tail lashed back and forth, for balance or for rage. The tip knocked both walls, *toc toc toc*. I'd be whipped bloody if I tried to walk beside him. I stayed ahead.

The Jotok trailed us well back from the tail. It wore a five-armhole vest with pockets. It used four limbs as legs. One it held stiff. I pictured a crippled Kzin buying a crippled Jotok . . . but Paradoxical had been agile enough climbing the ladder. I must have missed something.

The file on Jotoki said to call it *they*, but that just felt wrong.

"Piracy," the Kzin said, "would explain why everything is on its side."

"Yah. They burned out our thruster. The captain had to spin us up with attitude jets."

"I don't know that weapon. Speak of the ship," he said. "One? Kzinti?"

"One ship popped up behind us and fired on us as it went past. It's a little smaller than *Odysseus*. Then a Kzin called us. Act of war, he said. Get the captain to play that for you. He spoke Interworld. . . not as well as you." Fly-By-Night talked like he'd grown up around humans. Maybe he was from Fafnir. "The ship stopped twenty million miles distant and sent a boat. That's on its way here now. Our telescopes pick up markings in the Heroes' Tongue. We can't read them."

He said, "If we were traveling faster than light, we could not be intercepted. Did your captain consider that?"

"Better you should ask, why are we *out* of hyperdrive? LE Fly-By-Night, there is an extensive star building region between Fafnir and Home. Going through the Tao Gap in Einstein space is easier than going around and gives us a *wonderful* view, but we're *in* it now. Stuck. We can't send a hyperwave help call, we can't jump to hyperdrive, because there's too much mass around us."

"*Odysseus* has no weapons," the Kzin said.

"I don't have actual rank aboard *Odysseus*. I don't know what weapons we have." And I wouldn't tell a Kzin.

He said, "I learned that before I boarded. *Odysseus* is a modular cargo ship. Some of the modules are passenger cabins. Outbound Enterprises could mount weapons modules, but they never have. None of their other commuter ships are any better. The other ship, how is it armed?"

"Looks like an archaic Kzinti warship, *dis*armed. Gun ports slagged and polished flat. We haven't had a close look, but ships like that have been all over known space since before I was born. Armed Kzinti wouldn't be allowed to land. Whatever took out our gravity motors isn't showing. It must be on the boat."

"Why is this corridor so long?"

Odysseus was a fat disk with motors and tanks in the center, a corridor around the rim, slots outboard to moor staterooms and cargo modules. That shape makes it easy to spin up if something goes wrong with the motors . . . which was still common enough a century ago, when *Odysseus* was built.

In the ship's map display I'd seen stateroom modules widely separated, so

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I'd hacked the passenger manifest. That led me to read up on Kzinti and Jotoki. The first secret to tourism is, *read everything*.

I said, "Some LE may have decided not to put a Kzin too close to human passengers. They put you two in a four-passenger suite and mounted it all the way around clockwise. My single and two doubles and the crew quarters and an autodoc are all widdershins." That put the aliens' module right next to the lobby, not far apart at all, but the same fool must have sealed off access from the aliens' suite. Despite the Covenants, some people *don't like* giving civil rights to Kzinti.

I'd best not say *that*. "We're the only other live passengers. The modules between are cargo, so these," I stamped on a door, "don't currently open on anything."

"If you are not a ship's officer," the Kzin asked, "what is your place on the bridge?"

I said, "Outbound Enterprises was getting ready to freeze me. Shashter cops pulled me out. They had questions regarding a murder."

"Have you killed?" His ears flicked out like little pink fans. I had his interest.

"I didn't kill Ander Smittarasheed. He took some cops down with him, and he'd killed an ARM agent. ARMs are—"

"United Nations police and war arm, Sol system, but their influence spreads throughout human space."

"Well, they couldn't question Smittarasheed, and I'd eaten dinner with him a few days earlier. I told them we met in Pacifica City at a water war game . . . anyway, I satisfied the law, they let me loose. I was just in time to board, and *way* too late to get myself frozen and into a cargo module. Outbound Enterprises upgraded me. Very generous.

"So Milcenta and Jenna—my mate and child—are frozen in one of these," I stamped on a door, "and I'm up here, flying First Class at Ice Class expense. My cabin's a closet, so we must be expected to spend most of our time in the lobby. In here." I pushed through.

This trip, there were two human crew, five human passengers, and the aliens. The lobby would have been roomy for thrice that. Whorls of couches and tables covered a floor with considerable space above it for free fall dancing. That feature didn't generally get much use.

An observation dome exposed half the sky. It opened now on a tremendous view of the Nursery Nebula.

Under spin gravity, several booths and the workstations had rolled up a wall. There was a big airlock. The workstations were two desk-and-couch modules in the middle.

Hans and Hilde Van Zild were in one of the booths. Homers coming back from Fafnir, they held hands tightly and didn't talk. Recent events had them extremely twitchy. They were both over two hundred years old. I've known people in whom that didn't show, but in these it did.

Their kids were hovering around the workstations watching the captain and First Officer at work, asking questions that weren't being answered.

We'd been given vac packs. More were distributed around the lobby and along the corridor. Most ships carry them. You wear it as a bulky fanny pack. If you pull a tab, or if it's armed and pressure drops to zero, it blows up into a refuge. Then you hope you can get into it and zip it shut before your blood boils.

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Heidi Van Zild looked around. "Oh, *good!* You brought them!" The little girl snatched up two more vac packs, ran two steps toward us, and froze.

The listing said Heidi was near forty. Her brother Nicolaus was thirty; the trip was his birthday present. Their parents must have had their development arrested. They looked the same age, ten years old or younger, bright smiles and sparkling eyes, hair cut identically in a golden cockatoo crest.

It's an attitude, a lifestyle. You put off children until that second century is running out. Now they're precious. They'll live forever. Let them take their time growing up. Keep them awhile longer. Keep them *pure*. Give them a *real* education. Any mistake you make as a parent, there will be time to correct that too. When you reverse the procedure and allow them to reach puberty they'll be better at it.

I know people who do that to kittens.

Some of a child's rash courage is ignorance. By thirty it's gone. The little girl's smile was a rictus. Aliens were here for her entertainment; she would not willingly miss any part of the adventure; but she just couldn't make herself approach the Kzin or his octopus servant. The boy hadn't even tried.

First Officer Quickpony finished what she'd been doing. She stood in haste, took the vacuum packs from Heidi and handed them to the aliens. "Fly-By-Night, thank you for coming. Thank you, Mart. You'd be Paradoxical?"

The woman's body language invited a handshake, but the Jotok didn't. "Yes, we are Paradoxical, greatly pleased to meet you."

The Kzin snarled a question in the Heroes' Tongue. Everybody's translators murmured in chorus, "Is *this* the bridge?"

Quickpony said, "Bridge and lobby, they're the same space. You didn't know? We wondered why you never came around."

"I was not told of this option. There is merit in the posture that one species should not see another eat or mate or use the recycle port. But, LE Quickpony, your security is a joke! Bridge and passengers and no barrier? When did you begin building ships this way?"

Captain Preiss looked up. He said, "Software flies us. I can override, but I can disable the override. Hijackers can't affect that."

"What of your current problem? Did you record the Kzin's demand?"

The captain spoke a command.

A ghostly head and shoulders popped up on the holostage, pale orange but for two narrow, lofty black eyebrows. "I am *Mee-rowreet*. Call me Envoy. I speak for the Longest War."

My translator murmured, "*Mee-rowreet,* profession, manages livestock in a hunting park. *Longest War,* Kzin term for evolution."

The recording spoke Interworld, but with a strong accent and flat grammar. "We seek a fugitive. We have destroyed your gravity motors. We will board you following the Covenants sworn at Shasht at twenty-five naught five your dating. Obey, never interfere," the ghost head and voice grew blurred, "give us what we demand. You will all survive."

"The signal was fuzzed out by distance," Captain Preiss said. "The ship came up from behind and passed us at two hundred KPS relative, twenty minutes after we dropped out of hyperdrive. It's ahead of us by two light-minutes, decelerated to match our speed."

I said, speaking low, "Pleasemadam," alerting my pocket computer, "seek interstellar law, document Covenants of Shasht date twenty-five-oh-five. Run it."

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Fly-By-Night looked up into the dome. "Your intruder?"

We were deep into the Nursery Nebula. All around were walls of tenuous interstellar dust lit from within. In murky secrecy, intersecting shock waves from old supernovae were collapsing the interstellar murk into hot whirlpools that would one day be stars and solar systems. Out of view below us, light pressure from something bright was blowing columns and streams of dust past us. It all took place in an environment tens of light years across. Furious action seemed frozen in time.

We had played at viewing the red whorl overhead. In IR, you saw only the suns, paired protostars lit by gravitational collapse and the tritium flash, that had barely begun to burn. UV and X-ray showed violent flashes and plumes where planetesimals impacted, building planets. Neutrino radar showed structure forming within the new solar system.

We could not yet make out the point mass that would bend our course into the Tao Gap and out into free space. Turnpoint Star was a neutron star a few miles across, the core left by a supernova. But stare long enough and you could make out an arc on the sky, the shock wave from that same stellar explosion, broken by dust clouds collapsing into stars.

My seek system chimed. I listened to my wrist computer:

At the end of the Fourth Man-Kzin War, the Human Space Trade Alliance annexed Shasht and renamed the planet Fafnir, though the long, rocky, barren continent kept its Heroes' Tongue name. The Covenants of Shasht were negotiated then. We were to refrain from booting Kzinti citizens off Fafnir. An easy choice: they prefer the continent, whereas humans prefer the coral islands. They were already expanding an interstellar seafood industry into Patriarchy space.

In return, and having little choice, the Patriarch barred himself, his clan and all habitats under his command, all others to be considered outlaw, from various acts. Eating of human meat . . . willful destruction of habitats . . . biological weapons of certain types . . . killing of Legal Entities, that word defined by a *long* list of exclusions, a narrower definition than in most human laws.

Futz, I wasn't a Legal Entity! Or I wouldn't be if they learned who I was.

Quickpony projected a virtual lens on the dome. I'd finish listening later. The Kzinti ship and its boat, vastly magnified, showed black with the red whorl behind them. There was enough incident light to pick out some detail.

For a bare instant we had seen the intruder coming up behind us, just as our drive juddered and died and left us floating. After it slowed to a relative stop, a boat had detached. The approaching boat blocked off part of the ship. Gamma rays impacting their magnetic shields made two arcs of soft white glow. Ship and boat bore the same glowing markings.

The ship was moving just as we were, its drive off, falling through luminous murk toward Turnpoint Star at a tenth of lightspeed.

First Officer Quickpony said, *"Odysseus'* security systems can deal with hijackers, but they're just not much use against an armed warship. Is that what we're seeing?"

"I see a small warship designed for espionage and hunting. I don't know the make. My knowledge is too old. The name reads *Sraff-zisht.*" My translator said, "Stealthy mating."

Fly-By-Night continued, "Captain, I can't see, are there magnetic moorings on *Sraff-zisht?*"

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"No need. Those big magnets on the boat would lock to the ship's gamma ray shielding."

"The boat is armed, the ship is not? There is no bay for the boat? Understood. Leave the boat in hiding among asteroids. Land an unarmed converted cargo ship on any civilized world. Yes?"

"Speculative," Preiss said.

"Do you recognize the weapon?"

"No. I assume it's what burned out our thrusters . . . our gravity motors."

I sat and dialed a cappuccino. The Kzin joined me, dwarfing the booth. I dialed another with double milk, thinking he ought to try it.

The other passengers shrank back a little and waited. Any human being knows how to fear a Kzin.

I said, speaking low, "Pleasemadam, seek Heroes' Tongue references, stealthy mating, literal, no reference to rape." There had to be a way to narrow that further. I guessed: "Seek biological references only. Run it."

Fly-By-Night tasted the cappuccino.

Captain Preiss said, "Why would they be interested in *us?*"

"In me. The boat is close." Fly-By-Night sipped again. "Do you know of the *Angel's Pencil?*"

The Kzin was speaking Interworld as smoothly as if he'd grown up with the language. Some of us gaped. But his first words to me had been Interworld, after I startled and angered him . . . and he liked cappuccino.

Fly-By-Night said, "*Angel's Pencil* was a slowboat, one of Sol system's slower-than-light colony craft. Four hundred years ago, *Angel's Pencil* sent word of our coming. Sol system was given years to prepare. My ancestor Shadow contrived to board *Pencil* after allying himself with a human captive, Selena Guthlac. He and she joined their crew."

"That must have been one futz of a makeup job," Nicolaus Van Zild said.

"He had to stoop and keep his ears folded, and depilate! Whose story is this, boy?" Nicolaus grinned. The Kzin said, "*Angel's Pencil's* crew had already destroyed *Tracker.* They later destroyed *Gutting Claw*, the first and second kills of the First War, not bad for a ship with no intended armaments.

"*Pencil* was forced to pass through Patriarchy space before they found a world to settle. None of those ramscoop ships were easy to turn, and none were built for more than one voyage. We were ninety light years from Earth. One hundred and six years had passed on Earth."

I asked, "We?"

"*Gutting Claw's* Telepath, later named Shadow, is our first sire. *Pencil* rescued six females from the Admiral's harem. Our species have lived together on Sheathclaws for three hundred years. We remained cut off. Any message laser aimed at human space would pass through the Patriarchy. We spoke with no sapient species, we did not even know of faster-than-light travel, until. . . ." Fly-By-Night looked up.

Stealthy-Mating's boat had arrived. We were looking directly into an obtrusively large electromagnetic weapon.

Nicolaus asked, "Can you read minds?"

"No, child. Some of us are good at guessing, but we don't have the drug. Where was I?" Fly-By-Night said, "They told me in the hospital after my first failed name quest. The universe had opened up—" He cut himself off as a furry face popped into hologram space in the workstation.

"I am Envoy. I speak for the Longest War. Terminate your spin. Open the airlock."

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Captain Preiss nodded to Quickpony. Reaction motors whispered, slowing us.

Fly-By-Night spoke more rapidly. "Boarding seems imminent. You cannot protect me. Give me to them. If you live long enough to speak to your people, tell them that three grown males left Sheathclaws on our name quests. Half our genes derive from Shadow, from a telepath. The Patriarch needs telepaths. Now he will learn of a world peopled by *Gutting Claw's* telepath, none of whom has felt the addiction to sthondat lymph in three hundred years."

Gravity eased away until sideways thrust was all there was, and then that was gone too. *Odysseus'* outer airlock door opened.

The boat thumped into place against our hull. The older Van Zilds and I had our seat webs in place. The children floated, clinging to the arms of couches.

"They will have *my* genes. They will find Sheathclaws," Fly-By-Night concluded. "You will face my children in the next war, if they have their way."

Two big pressure-suit shapes left the boat on jet packs. One entered the lock. We heard it cycle. The other waited on the hull, to shoot the dome out if he saw resistance.

The inner door opened. The armored Kzin entered in a leap, up and into the dome where his companions could see him, a half turn to keep us in view. In his hand was a light that he aimed like a weapon. He was graceful as a fish.

I squinted to save my vision. The light played over every part of the lobby and workstation. What he saw must have been reassuring.

Envoy said, "We have demands. The Covenants will be followed where possible. All losses will be paid. Give us your passenger. He is in violation of our law. Fly-By-Night, is this Jotok your slave?"

"Yes."

"Fly-By-Night, Jotok, you must enter your vacuum packs. Fly-By-Night, give your w'tsai to Packer."

"W'tsai?" Fly-By-Night asked. "This? My *knife?*"

"Carefully."

Giving up his w'tsai was the ultimate surrender. If *I* knew that from my reading, surely a *Kzin* knew it. Three hundred years among humans. . . . Had they lost the tradition?

But Fly-By-Night was offering a silver knife-prong-spoon ten inches long and dark with tarnish.

A spoony? We ate with those! They matched several shapes of digits and were oversized for human hands. *Odysseus'* kitchen melted the silver to kill bacteria, then squirted it into molds for the next meal.

Packer took it, stared at it, then showed it to Envoy's hologram. Envoy snarled in the Heroes' Tongue. He wasn't buying it.

Our passenger answered in Interworld. "Yes, mine! See, here is my symbol," the sign of Outbound Enterprises, a winged craft black against a crescent world. "Fly by night!"

A laugh would be bad. I looked at the children. They looked solemn.

Of Packer's weapon I saw only a glare of light. But he held it on Fly-By-Night as if it *had* to fire something deadly, and he snarled a command and lashed out with his tail. Under the minor impact Fly-By-Night spun slowly so that Packer could examine him for more weapons.

He snarled again. Fly-By-Night and Paradoxical pulled tabs on vacuum

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packs. The packs popped into double-walled spheres. Held open by higher pressure, the collar on each refuge inflated like a pair of fat lips.

Fly-By-Night had trouble wriggling through the collar. Once inside he had room. These vacuum refuges would have held the whole Van Zild family. Paradoxical looked quite lost in his.

Envoy spoke. "Captain, you carry human passengers frozen in three cargo modules. Release these modules."

The world went gray.

I began to breath deep and hard, to hyperoxygenate, because I dared not faint.

Captain Preiss's hands hadn't moved. That was brave, but it wouldn't save anyone.

The elder Van Zilds buried their faces in each other's shoulders. The children were horrified and fascinated. They watched everything. Once I caught them looking at their parents in utter contempt.

Like them, I had been half enjoying the situation.

This would have been my last interstellar flight. Chance had me riding not as frozen cargo, but as a passenger, aware and entertained.

Flying the ship would have been more fun, of course.

Quickpony had suggested joining our cabins, as we were the obvious unpaired pair. I showed Quickpony videos displayed by the circuitry in my ring. Our lockstep ceremony. Jenna/Jeena just a year old. Sharrol/Milcenta not yet pregnant again; I should have updated while I could. *We are lockstepped, see, here is our ring*. Quickpony admired and dropped the subject.

And that left *what* for entertainment?

Kzinti hijackers!

I'd treated it like a game until *Stealthy-Mating* claimed my family. Bound into my couch by a crash web, I let my hand rest on the release while I considered what weapons I might have at hand.

Lips drawn back, fangs showing, Envoy's speech was turning mushy. "Examine the Covenants, Captain Preiss. They were never altered. We take only hostages. They will be returned unharmed when our needs are satisfied. Compensation will be paid for every cost incurred."

"What crime do you claim against Fly-By-Night?" Quickpony asked.

"His ancestor committed treason against his officers and the Patriarch. Penalties hold against his blood line forever. We may claim his life, but we will not. We value his blood line."

"Has *Fly-By-Night* committed a crime?"

"False identity. Purchase of a Jotok without entitlement. Trivia."

Dumb and happy Mart Graynor wasn't the type to carry weapons aboard a spacecraft. The recorded Covenant of 2505 might be the only weapon I had. I let it play in one ear. The old diplomatic language was murky. . . .

Here it was. *Hostages are to be returned in health if all conditions met, conditions not to be altered . . . costs to be assessed in time of peace at earliest . . .*

Was I supposed to bet *lives* on *this?*

Heidi asked, "Do you eat human meat?"

Packer and the hologram both turned to the girl. Envoy said, "Hostages. I have *said*. The Covenants *say*. Kitten, we consider human meat to be . . . *whasht-meery* . . . unsafe. Captain Preiss, the modules we want are all addressed to Outbound on Home, yes? We will deliver them. Else we would face all the navies of human space."

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Preiss said, "I have no such confidence."

Packer kicked down from the dome. He set his huge hands on the girl's waist and looked into her face. He still hadn't spoken.

Nicolaus screamed and leapt. As he came at the armored Kzin, Packer reached out and wrapped both children against his armored chest. They looked up through the bubble helmet into a Kzin's smile.

Nicolaus bared his teeth.

Envoy said, "Pause, Packer! Captain Preiss, think! Without gravity generators you must still fall around Turnpoint Star and into flat space. Hyperdrive will take you to the edge of Home system. Call for help to tow you the rest of the way. What other path have we? We might smash your hyperdrive and hyperwave and leave you to die here, silenced, but your absence at Home will set the law seeking us.

"This is the better risk, to violate no law unless we must. We take hostages. You must not call your authorities until you arrive near Home. We will transport our prisoner, then deliver your passengers."

Packer's arms were full of children: hampered. Preiss and Quickpony were on a hair trigger. I was unarmed, but if they moved, I would.

"Wait," Envoy said. Preiss still hadn't moved. "You carry stock from Shasht? Sea life?"

"Yes."

"I must speak with my leader. Lightspeed gap is two minutes each way. Do nothing threatening."

We heard Envoy yowling into his communicator. Then nothing.

My pocket computer *dinged*.

Everybody twitched, yeeped, or looked around. *Sea lions around the Earth's poles live in large communities built around one alpha male, many females and their pups, and several beta males that live around the edges of the herd. When the alpha male is otherwise occupied, an exile may rush in and mate hurriedly with a female and escape. Several species of Earth's mammals have adapted such a breeding strategy, as have life forms on Kzin and even many Kzinti clans. Biologists, particularly reproductive biologists, call them* sneaky-fuckers.

I said, "Maybe there's a more polite term for the journals. Anyway, good name for a spy ship. Pleasemadam, seek Longest War plus Kzinti plus piracy, run it."

We waited.

When Hans Van Hild couldn't stand the silence any more, he said, "Heidi, Nicolaus, I'm sorry. We should have let you grow up."

"Hans!"

"*Yes*, Hilde, there was all the time in the world. Hilde, there's *never* time. Never a way to know."

Envoy spoke. "Release one of the modules for Outbound Enterprises and two addressed to Neptune's Empire. The passengers will be returned. Neptune's Empire will be recompensed for their stock."

Fish?

Captain Preiss's fingertips danced. Three cargo modules slowly rose out of the rim. I felt utterly helpless.

Packer left the children floating. He pushed Fly-By-Night's balloon toward the airlock.

I said, "Wait."

The armored Kzin turned. I squinted against the glare of his weapon. "We

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do not permit slavery aboard *Odysseus,*" I said. "*Odysseus* belongs to the Human Space Trade Alliance. The Jotok stays."

"Who are you? Where derives your authority?" Envoy demanded.

"Martin Wallace Graynor. No authority, but the law—"

"Fly-By-Night purchased a Jotok and holds him as property. We hold Fly-By-Night as property. Local law crawls before interspecies covenants. The Jotok comes. Are you concerned for the well-being of the Jotok?"

I said, "Yes."

"You shall observe if he is mistreated. Enter a vacuum refuge now."

I caught Quickpony's horror. She spun around to search her screen display of the Covenants for some way to stop this. Packer pulled Fly-By-Night toward the airlock. He wasn't waiting.

Neither did I. I launched myself gently toward the refuge that held the Jotok.

It would not have occurred to me to hug the only available little girl before I disappeared into the Nursery Nebula. I launched, Heidi launched, and she was in my path, arms spread, bawling. I hugged her, let our momentum turn us, whispered something reassuring and let go. She drifted toward a wall, I toward the Jotok's bubble.

She'd put something bulky in my zip pocket.

I crawled through the collar into the Jotok's vacuum refuge and zipped the lips closed.

Packer pushed Fly-By-Night into the airlock, closed it, cycled it. His armored companion on the hull pulled the bubble into space. Packer came back for us and cycled us through.

Two bubbles floated outside *Odysseus,* slowly rotating, slowly diverging. Packer was still in *Odysseus.*

The boat jerked into motion. We watched as it maneuvered above one of the brick-shaped cargo modules attached to *Odysseus*. A pressure-armored Kzin stood below, guiding.

Nobody was coming after us.

The Jotok asked, "Martin, was that sane? What were you thinking?"

I said, "Pleasemadam, seek interspecies diplomacy plus Kzinti plus Longest War. Run it. Paradoxical, I was thinking of a rescue. I tried to bust you loose. You know more about Fly-By-Night than I could ever learn. I need what you can tell me."

"You have no authority to question us," the Jotok said, "unless you hold ARM authority."

I laughed harder than he would have expected. "I'm not an ARM. No authority at all. Do you want Fly-By-Night freed? Do you want your own freedom?"

"We had that! LE Graynor, when Fly-By-Night bought us from the orange underground market on Shasht, he swore to free us. On Sheathclaws chains of lakes run from mountains to sea. We would have bred in their lakes. All of the Jotoki populace of Sheathclaws would be our descendants. We have been robbed of our destiny!"

I asked, "Did Fly-By-Night take more slaves than just you?"

"No."

"Then who did you expect to mate with?"

"We are five! Jotoki grow like your eels, not sapient. Reach first maturity, seek each other, cluster in fives. Brains grow links. Reach second maturity,

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seek a lake, divide, breed and die, like your salmon. LE Mart, you yourselves are two minds joined by a structure called *corpus callosum*. Join is denser in Kzinti, that species has less redundancy, but still brain is two lobes. We are five lobes, narrow joins. Almost individuals cooperate, *Par-Rad-Doc-Sic-Cal, Doc* talks, *Par* walks, *Cal* for fine scale coordination. Almost five-lobe mind, sometimes lock in indecision. In trauma or in fresh water we may divide again. May join again to cluster differently, different person. You perceive?"

Futz, it was an interesting picture, but I'd never grasp what it was like to *be* Jotok. The point was that Paradoxical was a breeding population.

I asked, "Are you hungry? What do you eat?"

"Privately."

"Didn't Fly-By-Night see you eat?"

"Only once."

I'd put a handmeal in my pocket, but I wouldn't eat in front of Paradoxical after that. "Orange market?"

"An extensive market exists among the Shasht Kzinti. They trade intelligence, electronics, stolen goods, and slaves. Shasht the continent is nearly lifeless. They seeded several lakes for our breeding and confinement, but without maintenance they die off. The trade could be stopped. Our lakes must show a different color from orbit. I surmise the law has no interest."

"You once held an interstellar empire—"

"My master tells me so. The slavers don't teach us. Properly speaking, they do not hold slaves at all. They hold fish ponds. When a purchaser wants a Jotok, five swimming forms are allowed to assemble. Our master is the first thing we see."

"Who chose your name?"

"My master. I am free and slave, many and one, land and sea dweller, a paradox."

"He really does think in Interworld, doesn't he? They must teach Kzinti as a second language."

A magnetic grapple locked in place, and the first module came free.

My pocket computer *ding*ed. We listened:

Longest War, a political entity never named until after the Second War With Men, has since been claimed by many Kzinti groups. It may appear in connection with piracy, disappearing LEs, or disappearing ships, but never an action against planets or a major offensive. Claim has been made, never proved, that Longest War are any Patriarch's servants whom the Patriarch must disclaim. We surmise also that the Longest War names any group who hope for the eye of the Patriarch. Events include 2399 Serpent Swarm, 2410 Kdat—

Fly-By-Night had drifted so far that he was hard to find, just a twinkle of lensed light as starfog glow passed behind his vac refuge. Why didn't they retrieve him? Was it really Fly-By-Night they wanted, or something else?

I watched *Stealthy-Mating*'s boat retrieve a second cargo module. They weren't being careful. Two of those boxes held only Fafnir's thousand varieties of fish, but the other . . . was in a quantum state. It held and did not hold Sharrol/Milcenta and Jenna/Jeena, until some observer could open the module.

In all the years I'd flown for Nakamura Lines, I had never seen a vac pack used. Light-years from any world, miles from any ship, with nothing but

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clear plastic skin between me and the ravenous vacuum . . . it seemed a good time to look it over.

This wasn't the brand we'd carried. It was newer, or else a more expensive model.

Loops of tough ribbon hung everywhere: handholds. Air tank. A tube two liters in volume had popped out. Inner zip, outer zip: an airlock. We could be fed through that, or get rid of wastes . . . a matter I would not raise with Paradoxical just yet.

A light. A sleeve and glove taped against the wall, placed to reach the outer zip. Here was a valve . . . hmm . . . a valve ending in a little cone outside. Inside, a handle to aim it.

To any refugee there might come a moment when a jet is more important than breathing-air.

Not yet.

"Why would you want to rescue my master?" Paradoxical asked.

"They have my wife and daughter and unborn, one chance out of three. Two out of three they're still safe aboard *Odysseus*. Would you bet?"

"No Jotok knows his parent. Might you find another mate and generate more children?"

I didn't answer.

"How do you like your battle plan so far?"

I couldn't hear sarcasm, but I inferred it. I said, "I have a spare vac pack. So does Fly-By-Night. Did you see what he did? He triggered a pack on the wall. Kept his own. And Heidi passed me something."

"What did the girl give you?"

"Might be some kind of toy."

The Jotok said, "*Mee-rowreet* means make slaves and beasts go where can be killed. Not *Envoy*. *Whasht-meery* means infested or diseased, too rotted or parasitical for even a starving predator. Prey that dies too easily, opponent who exposes belly too soon, is suspect *whasht-meery*."

I waited for our spin to hide me from *Stealthy-Mating*'s telescopes before I pulled Heidi's gift free.

It was foam plastic, light and bulky. A toy needle gun. If this was real, her parents. . . . Wait, now, Heidi was almost forty years old!

They wouldn't think quite like human adults, these children, but their brains were as big as they were going to get. Their parents *might* want them able to protect themselves . . . and if not, she and her brother had spent decades learning how to manipulate their parents.

I couldn't test it.

"Needle gun. Anaesthetic crystals," I told Paradoxical. "They won't get through armor. One wouldn't knock out a Kzin anyway. Better than nothing, though. Where is Fly-By-Night's w'tsai?"

"You saw."

"Paradoxical, we are in too much trouble to be playing children's games."

Paradoxical said nothing.

Stealthy-Mating's boat locked on to the third cargo module.

I said, "That was fun to watch, though. Giving Packer silverware!"

Paradoxical rotated to show me his mouth.

I saw a star of tentacles around a circle of lip enclosing five circles of tiny teeth in a pentagon. Something emerged from one circle of teeth. Paradoxical vomited up a long, narrow, padded mailing bag. I pulled it free, unzipped it, and had a yard of blade and handle.

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The blade looked like dark steel. The light caught a minute ripple effect . . . but it was all wrong. To my fingertip's touch the ripple was just a picture. The blade weighed almost nothing. The weight was all in the handle.

In the end of the hilt was a small black enamel bat. Bats exist only on Earth and in the zoo on Jinx, but that ancient *Batman* symbol has gone to every human world. *Fly by night.*

Futz, I had to try it on *something*.

My lockstep ring had a silver case. That's a soft metal, but the blade only scratched it. I tested my thumb on the edge, gingerly. Blunt.

Customs change. A weapon can be purely ceremonial . . . but why make the handle so heavy? Why was Paradoxical watching me?

Because it was a puzzle.

Push the enamel bat. Nothing.

Wiggle the blade. Push it in, risk my fingers, feel it give. A Kzin could push *harder*. Nothing? Pull *out,* and my fingertips felt a hum. The look of the blade didn't change. Carefully now, don't touch the edge—

It sliced neatly through my lockstep ring, with a moment's white sputter as circuitry burned out. The cut edges of the classic silver band shone like little mirrors. There should have been *some* resistance.

A variable-knife is violently illegal: hair-fine wire in a magnetic field, all edge and no blade, thin enough to slice through walls and machinery. Often enough it hurts the wielder. When it's off it's all handle, and the handle is heavy: it holds the coiled wire and the mag generator.

This toy was similar, but with a blade of fixed length, harder to hide. More sporting. A groove around the edge housed the wire until magnets raised it for action.

The onyx bat was recessed now. I pushed and it popped out. The vibration stopped.

We had a weapon.

What was keeping Packer? They had the telepath, they had hostages, they had two modules of Fafnir seafood. What was left to do in there? Get on with it. I had a weapon!

"Wait before you use it. We know our master," the Jotok said. "He will take command of the boat. The larger ship is weaponless against it."

"Paradoxical, he'd be fighting at least three warriors trained in free fall. Don't forget the pilots. Four if we get as far as the ship."

"*Whasht-meery* may currently be on autopilot or remote. Possession of armor does not imply training. Fly-By-Night was a champion wrestler before he was injured. We fear you're right. But we must try!"

"Wrestler?"

"He tells me they fight with capped claws on Sheathclaws."

Somehow I was not reassured.

Packer emerged.

He and his companion jetted toward Fly-By-Night's bubble. They pulled Fly-By-Night toward the boat. Clamshell doors opened around the snout of the solenoid weapon. The three disappeared inside.

I safed and wrapped the w'tsai and gave it to the Jotok. He swallowed it, and the needler after it. He must have a straight gut . . . five straight guts, I thought, like fish or worms all merged at the head.

The two armored Kzinti came for us. They towed us toward the boat.

The boat was a thick lens, like *Odysseus* but smaller. The modules were

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anchored against one side. The other side was two transparent clamshell doors with the hollow solenoid sticking out between them.

The doors closed over us.

The interior had been arrayed around the solenoid weapon. There were lockers. Hatch in the floor, a smaller airlock. A kitchen wall big enough for a cruise ship, with a gaping intake hopper. A big box, detachable, with a door in it. I took that for a shower/washroom. I didn't see a hologram stage or a mass pointer.

Mechanisms fed into the base of the main weapon. A feed for projectiles? The thing didn't just burn out electronics, it was a linear accelerator too, a cannon.

Fly-By-Night's vacuum refuge had been wedged between the cannon and the wall. He watched us.

The doors came down and now our balloon was wedged next to his. Gravity came on. *Stealthy-Mating*'s crew anchored us with a spray of glue, while a third Kzin watched from the horseshoe of a workstation. The two took their places beside him.

Four chairs; three Kzinti all in pressure suit armor. There was no separate cabin because they might have to work the cannon. It could have been worse.

They talked for a bit, mobile mouths snarling at each other inside fishbowl helmets. They fiddled with the controls. A sound of tigers fighting blasted from Paradoxical's backpack vest. My translator murmured, "So, Telepath! Welcome back to the Patriarch's service."

Two or three seconds of silence followed. In that moment *Odysseus* abruptly shrank to a toy and was gone. Disturbing eddies played through our bodies. The boat must be making twenty or thirty gravities, but it had good shielding. This was a warcraft.

Their prisoner decided to answer. "You honor me. You may call me LE Fly-By-Night."

"Honored you should be, Telepath, but your credit as a Legal Entity is forged, a telepath has no name, and Fly-By-Night is only a description, and in Interworld, too! Still you will command a harem before we do. We should envy you." That voice was Envoy's.

"Call me Fly-By-Night if I am expected to answer. Does the Patriarch still make addicts of any who show the talent?"

"You have hibernated for three centuries? We use advanced medical techniques in this age. Chemical mimic of sthondat lymph, six syllable name, more powerful, few side effects, diet additives to minimize those."

A second Kzin voice said, "You need not taste the drug yourself, Telepath, by my alpha officer's word."

"Only my poor kits, then. But how well do Kzinti keep each other's promises? I know that *Odysseus* was disabled despite all reassurance."

What? Fly-By-Night had *no way* to know that. *I* was only guessing, and his vac refuge had floated further from *Odysseus* than our own.

But Envoy said, "All follows the Covenants sworn with men at Shasht. That was my assurance, and it is good."

"Do those allow you to maroon a Legal Entity ship in deep space?"

"Summon them. Read them."

"My servant carries my computer and disk library."

The pilot tapped; we heard a *click,* then silence.

Paradoxical turned off his talker. "We can use this to speak to my master,

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but they may listen. What can you say that those oversized intestinal parasites may hear too?"

"Right now, nothing. Thrusters were yours first, weren't they? Called the *gravity planer?*"

"Jotoki created gravity planers, yes. Kzinti enslaved us and stole the design. Your folk stole it from Kzinti invaders."

"Is there anything you know about thrusters that they don't? Something that might help?"

"No. Idiot. What we learned of gravity motors, we learned from Kzinti!"

"Futz—"

"We had thought," Paradoxical said carefully, "that they would not keep their control room in vacuum."

"Their hostages are all frozen. Can't fight. Can't escape. Maybe they like that? Anything we try now would leave us dying in vacuum. How long can a Jotok stand vacuum?"

"A few seconds, then death."

"Humans can take a few minutes." Humans had, and survived. It was rare. "I might go blind first. Do you mind if I think out loud for a bit?"

"Do you talk to yourself to move messages across that narrow structure in your brain, the *corpus callosum?*"

"I have no idea." So I talked across my corpus callosum. "This is bad, but it could be worse. We might have been in a separate cargo hold, *still* in vacuum and locked out of a flight cabin."

"Rejoice."

"I thought I wouldn't have to worry about *Odysseus*. The ship's on a free fall course around Turnpoint Star, through the Gap and into free space. They still had hyperdrive and hyperwave and the attitude jets, last I saw. Attitude jets are just fusion reaction motors. That won't *take* them anywhere. Hyperdrive only works in flat space, so it won't get them *into* a solar system. They could still cross to Home system, call for help and get a tow. Two weeks?"

"Envoy said all of that to Captain Preiss. Wait—but—stop—didn't Envoy confess otherwise?"

"I heard. Futz." Fly-By-Night had done that very cleverly. But Envoy hadn't confessed; he had only insisted that he had not violated the Covenants.

"We'd better assume Packer shot up the control board. That would leave *Odysseus* as an inert box of hostages. Leave them falling. Retrieve them later."

Paradoxical said nothing.

"Next problem. Fly-By-Night can't get out of his refuge."

"Surely—"

"No, look, he can't *slash* his way out. He's got only his claws. He can *zip* it open. All the air spews out, and now he can try to get through the opening. He's too big. He'd die in vacuum while he was trying to wiggle free with those three laughing at him."

"Yes. Less than flexible, human and Kzinti. Are you small enough to get through the collar?"

"Yes." I was pretty sure. "Now, we can't warn Fly-By-Night. Any fighting, I'll have to start it. You're dead if I slash the refuge open, so I don't. I unzip it. Air pressure blows me out, *poof*. You zip it behind me *quick* so the refuge re-inflates. I'm in vacuum. I slash Fly-By-Night's refuge wide open and hand him the w'tsai. We're *both* fighting in vacuum against three Kzinti in pressure armor. How does it sound?"

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"Beyond madness."

"There's no point anyway. If we could take the boat, we still couldn't break lightspeed, because the hyperdrive motor is on the ship. We'd die of old age here in the Nursery Nebula."

"You don't have a plan?"

I was still feeling it out. "The only way out has us waiting for these bandits to berth the boat to *Stealthy-Mating*. Maybe it's a good thing Fly-By-Night doesn't have his w'tsai. Kzinti self control is . . . there's a word—"

"Oxymoron. But my master integrates selves well."

"They'll have to move the cargo modules inside the ship. Can't leave them where they are, they're blocking the magnets, the docking points. Where does that leave us? Whatever we do, we want the ship *and* the boat. After they birth the boat, likely enough they'll *still* leave the cabin in vacuum and us in these bubbles."

"My kind can survive six days without food. Two without water."

Two of the Kzinti crew might have been asleep. The third wasn't doing much.

One presently stirred—Envoy, by his suit markings—got up and disappeared into the big box with a door in it. Fifteen minutes later he was back.

Wouldn't a shower or a toilet *have* to be under pressure?

I watched my alien companions and my alien enemies. I watched the magnificent pageant of stars being born. I thought and I read.

Read everything.

Covenants of 2505. Commentary, then and recent. Kzinti sociology. Revisions: what constitutes torture . . . loss of limbs and organs . . . sensory deprivation. Violations. The right to a speedy trial, to speedy execution, not to be evaded. What is a Legal Entity. . . .

Male Kzinti were LEs. A computer program was not. Heidi and Nicolaus were not, poor kids, but Kzin kittens weren't either; it was a matter of maturity as an evolved being. Jotoki and Kdat were LEs unless legitimately enslaved. Entities with forged identities were not. Ice Class passengers were LEs. Good! Was there a rule against lying to hostages? Of course not, but I looked.

Paradoxical produced a computer from his backpack and went to work. I didn't ask what he might be learning.

I did *not* see Fly-By-Night tearing at his prison. When I caught his eye, I clawed at my own bubble. Our captors might be reassured if they saw some sign of hysterics, of despair.

He didn't take the hint.

Maybe I had him all wrong.

A telepath born among the Kzinti will be found as a kzitten, conscripted, and addicted to chemicals to bring out his ability. Telepaths detect spies and traitors; they assist in jurisprudence; they gradually go crazy. Alien minds drive them crazy much faster.

If a telepath feels an opponent's pain, he can't easily fight for mates. For generations the Patriarchy discouraged their telepaths from breeding. Then, battling an alien enemy during the Man-Kzin Wars, they burned them out.

Probably Envoy had spoken truth: what the Kzinti wanted from Fly-By-Night was more telepaths.

They'd get the location of Sheathclaws out of him. After they had what

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they wanted, they'd give him a harem. They'd imprison him in luxury. Envoy had said they wouldn't force the drug on him; it might be true.

A Kzin might settle for that.

I could come blasting out of my plastic bottle, screaming my air away, w't-sai swinging . . . cut him loose, and find myself fighting alone while he blew up another bubble for himself.

Fly-By-Night floated quite still, very relaxed, ears folded. He might have been asleep. He might have been watching his three captors guide the boat toward *Stealthy-Mating.*

I watched their ears. Ears must make it hard for a Kzin to lie. Lying to a hologram might be easier . . . and they wouldn't have called him *Envoy* for nothing.

Flick-flick of ears, bass meeping, a touch on the controls. We were flying through a lethal intensity of gamma rays.

The Jotok's armtips rippled over his keyboard. His computer was a narrow strip of something stiff; he'd glued or velcroed it to the bubble wall. The keyboard and holoscreen were projections. I knew the make—"Paradoxical? Isn't that a Gates Quintillian?"

"Yes. Human-built computers are superior to Patriarchy makes."

"Oh, that explains the corks! Fly-By-Night's fingers are too big for the keyboard, so he puts corks on his nails!"

The Jotok said, "You are Beowulf Shaeffer."

I spasmed like an electrocuted frog, then turned to gawk at him. "How can you possibly. . . ?"

How can you possibly think that a seven foot tall albino has lost fourteen inches of height and got himself curly black hair and a tan?

Hair dye and tannin secretion pills, and futz that, we had *real* trouble. I asked, "Have you spent three hours researching *me?*"

"You are the only ally at hand. I need to understand you better. You are wanted by the ARM for conspiracy abduction, four counts."

"Four?"

"Sharrol Janss, Carlos Wu, and two children. Feather Filip is your suspect co-conspirator. ARM interest seems to lie in the lost genes of Carlos Wu, but Sharrol Janss is alleged to be a flat phobe, hence would never have left Earth willingly."

"We all ran away together."

"My interest lies in your abilities, not your crimes. You were a civilian spacecraft pilot. Were you trained for agility in free fall?"

"Yes. Any emergency in a spacecraft, gravity is the first thing that goes."

"You're agile if you've escaped the ARM thus far. What has your reading gained you?"

"We have to live. We have to *win.*"

"These would be good ideas—"

"No, you don't get it." The Jotok *had* to understand. "The Covenants of 2505 permit taking of hostages. They only put restrictions on their treatment. I've played those futzy documents three times through. *Odysseus* is hostages-in-a-box, live and frozen. They won't starve. Envoy can take Fly-By-Night anywhere he likes, however long it takes, then come back and release *Odysseus.* It's all in the Covenants."

"If anything goes wrong," Paradoxical said, "they would never come."

"No, it's worse than that! If everything goes *right* for them, there's *no good reason* to go back unless it's to fill the food lockers! The Covenants only ap-

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ply when you're caught. My family is one hundred percent dead if we can't change that."

"Envoy's word may be good. No! Bad gamble. We should study the pot odds. Beowulf, have you evolved a plan?"

"I don't know enough."

The three crew were awake now, watching us as we watched them, though mostly they watched Fly-By-Night.

Paradoxical's talker burst to life. My translator said, "Tell us of the fight that injured you."

Fly-By-Night was slow to answer. "Sheathclaws folk are fond of hang gliding. We make much bigger hang gliders for Kzinti, and not so many of us fly. I was near grown, seeking a name. My intent was to fly from Blood Park to Touchdown, three hundred klicks along rocky shore and then inland, at night. Land in Offcentral Park. Startle humans into fits."

Packer snarled, "Startling humans is no fit way to earn a name!" and the unnamed Kzin asked, "Wouldn't the thermals be different at night?"

Fly-By-Night said, "Very different."

"Your second naming quest brought you here," Envoy stated.

"Yes. I hoped that a scarred Kzin might pass among other Kzinti. Challenge would be less likely. Any lapse in knowledge might be due to head injury. I might pass more easily on a world part Kzin and part human, like Shasht-Fafnir."

"You dance lightly over an important matter. Who lifted you from your world?"

"Where would be my honor if I told you that?"

"Smugglers? Bandits? What species? You will give us that too, Nameless." We heard the click: communication severed.

One of the Kzinti stood up. Another slashed the vacuum, a mere wrist gesture, but the first sat down again. The stars wheeled . . . and something that was not a star came into view, brilliant in pure laser colors: *Stealthy-Mating*'s riding lights.

I said, "We're about to dock. If anything happens, you keep the needle sprayer, I want the blade. Closing the zipper turns on the air, so don't lose *that*."

"No fear," said Paradoxical.

Gravity went away. We floated. The ships danced about each other. I would have docked less recklessly. I'm not a Kzin.

"*They* know too much about *us*," I said.

Paradoxical asked, "In what context?"

"They knew our manifest. They knew our position—"

"Finding another ship in interstellar space is not a thing they could plan, Beowulf."

"LE Graynor to you. Look at it this way," I said. "The only way to get here, falling through the Tao Gap in Einstein space, is to be going from Fafnir to Home. *Stealthy-Mating* got our route somehow. They started later with a faster ship. They might catch us approaching Home during deceleration . . . track our graviton wake . . . or snatch you and Fly-By-Night after you got through Customs. They *could not possibly* have expected to find *Odysseus* here. Catching us here was a fluke, an opportunity. They grabbed it."

"As you say."

"I *like* it."

Paradoxical stared. "Do you? Why?"

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"Clients, overlords, allies, any kind of support would have to be told that *Stealthy-Mating* is en route to Home. Any rendezvous with *Stealthy-Mating* is *at Home*. When could they change that? They're still headed for Home!"

"Very speculative."

"I know."

Stealthy-Mating's cargo bay was bigger than the boat's, under doors that opened like wings.

The boat released the cargo modules. Two Kzinti went out and began moving them. Envoy stayed behind. He watched the action in space, ignoring us.

"Not yet," Paradoxical said. I nodded. Fly-By-Night floated half curled up. He seemed to be asleep, but his ears kept flicking open like little fans.

I ate my handmeal. Paradoxical averted its eyes.

Packer and the nameless third crewperson set the modules moving one by one, and juggled them as they approached *Stealthy-Mating*. Waldo arms reached up to pull them into the bay and lock them. It seemed to take forever, but I'd have moved those masses one at a time. They were in a hurry. Rounding a point mass would scatter this loose stuff all across the sky.

Turnpoint Star must be near.

The cargo doors closed. *Stealthy-Mating* rotated, and the boat was pulled down against the hull. Now we were all one mass.

The hatch in the floor opened. Three Kzinti came through in pressure suits to join Envoy. The newcomer's chest and back showed a Kzinti snarl done in gaudy orange dots-and-commas. He spared a glance for me and Paradoxical, then turned to Fly-By-Night.

My translator said, "I am Meebrlee-Ritt."

"Futz!" Fly-By-Night exclaimed in Interworld.

"Your concern is noted. Yes, I am of the Patriarch's line. Your First Sire was *Gutting Claw*'s Telepath, who betrayed the Patriarch Rrowrreet-Ritt and showed prey how to destroy his own ship!"

"And he never even went back for the ears. Then again, they were inside a hot plasma," Fly-By-Night said.

To Envoy Meebrlee-Ritt said, "This one was to be tamed."

Envoy cringed, ears flat. Even I could hear the change in his voice, the whine. "Dominant One, this fool crippled himself for a failed joke, and that joke was his name quest! A lesser male he must be, never mated. His arrogance is bluff or insanity, or else life among humans has made him quite alien! But let Tech give us air pressure, release the telepath, and the stench of your rage will cow him soon enough!"

"Let us expend less effort than that." Meebrlee-Ritt turned back to Fly-By-Night. "Telepath, your life may be taken by any who happen upon you."

"Did you need my consent for this?"

"No!"

"Or my First Sire's confession? *That* may be summoned by any Sheathclaws school program. Then what shall we discuss? Tell us how you gained your name."

"I was born to it, of course. Let us discuss your future."

"I have a future?"

"Your blood line may be forgiven. You may keep your slaves, such as they are, and a harem of my choosing—"

"*Yours?* Dominant One, forgive my interruption, please continue."

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Even if he was familiar with human sarcasm, it wasn't likely Meebrlee-Ritt had been getting it from Kzinti! I'd read that Kzinti telepaths were flighty, not terribly bright. Meebrlee-Ritt spoke more slowly. "Yes, *my* choosing! You may live your life in honor and luxury, or you may die shredded by my hands."

"Meebrlee-Ritt, you would not expect me to leap into so difficult a decision. Will you bargain for the lives of your hostages?"

"Submissive and unarmed Humans." Meebrlee-Ritt sneezed his contempt. "But what would you bargain *with?* Your world?"

"Only my genes. Consider," said Fly-By-Night. In the Heroes' Tongue his speech was a long snarl, but the translation sounded placid enough. "He who is obeyed, who fights best, who *mates* is the alpha, the dominant one. You command that I mate? How will you persuade me that I am dominant? Submit to this one easy demand. Rescue my erstwhile hosts. Release them at Home."

"Why would I want you in rut? There are no females aboard *Sraff-zisht*. Packer, Envoy, you remain. Leave the gravity off. Tech, with me. Turnpoint Star is near."

Two Kzinti went through the hatch. Two took their seats. Their hands were idle. Now the boat rode *Stealthy-Mating* like a parasite.

I asked, "Can you see Turnpoint Star?"

"At point six kilometers across? You flatter me. I surmise it may be centered in that curdle," said Paradoxical.

Curdle? The tight little knot of glowing gas? I watched, watched . . . A red point blew up into a blue-white sun and I fell into it. The stars wheeled. The balloons that housed us rippled as if batted by invisible children. My body rippled too.

I'd been through this once, but much worse. I clutched the ribbon handholds in a death grip. I howled.

It only lasted seconds, but the terror remained. One of the Kzinti pointed at me and both laughed with their teeth showing.

Packer made his way to the shower/toilet. The other, Envoy, stayed at the board to look for tidal damage.

Fly-By-Night took handholds, subtly braced, ears spread wide. His eye caught mine. I said, "Paradoxical, *now*."

Paradoxical splayed itself like a starfish across the wall of the refuge, just next to the opening. It disgorged the handle of the w'tsai.

I pulled the wrapped blade from its gullet and stripped off the casing. Clutched the blade against me, exhaled hard, opened the zipper all in one sweep, smooth as silk. Pressure popped me out into the cabin, straight toward Envoy's back, screaming to empty my lungs before they exploded.

Push the blade in, pull out, feel the vibration.

I had thought to recoil off a wall and slice Fly-By-Night free. That wasn't going to work. The Kzin diplomat saw my shadow and spun around. I slashed, aiming to behead him, and shifted the blade to catch the cat-quick sweep of his arm.

He swept his arm through the blade and whacked me under the jaw.

That was a powerful blow. I spun dizzily away. His arm spun too, cut along a diagonal plane, spraying blood. Attached, it would have ripped my head off.

I caught myself against a wall and leapt.

The seat web still held Envoy. His right arm and sleeve sprayed blood and

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air. Envoy smashed left-handed at the controls, then hit the seat web and leapt out of my path. I got his foot! The knife was hellishly sharp. My ears were roaring, my sight was going, but vacuum tore at him too as his arm and ankle jetted blood and air. His balance was all off as he recoiled from the dome and came at me. He kicked. My angle was wrong and he grazed me.

Spinning, spinning, I starfished out so that the wall caught my momentum and killed my spin. I tried to find him.

The roar continued. My sight was foggy . . . no. The *cabin* was thick with fog. Fly-By-Night clawed his refuge wall, which had gone slack. We had air!

I *still* didn't have time to free Fly-By-Night because—*there* he was! Envoy was back at the controls. I was braced to leap when a white glare blazed from his hand.

He had the gun.

I changed my jump. It took me behind the cannon. Two projectiles punched into the wall behind me. I swiped the w'tsai in a wide slash across Fly-By-Night's vacuum refuge, and continued falling toward the shower/toilet. Packer couldn't ignore Ragnarok forever.

The door opened in my face and I chopped vertically. Packer was naked. His left hand was on the doorlock so I changed the cut, right to catch his free hand, his claws and the iron w'tsai he'd been holding. He whacked me hard but the blow was blunt. I spun once and crashed into Envoy and slashed.

Glimpsed Paradoxical behind him, braced myself and slashed. Paradoxical was firing anesthetic needles. The Kzin wasn't fighting back. I didn't see the implication so I kept slashing.

"Mart! LE Mart! *Beowulf!*"

I screamed, *"What?"* Disturbing me now could . . . what? Before me was a drifting cloud of blood and butchered meat. Paradoxical had stopped firing needles into it. Behind me, Fly-By-Night was on Packer's back, gnawing Packer's ear and fending off the hand that still had claws. Packer beat him with the blunted hand. They both looked trapped. Packer couldn't reach Fly-By-Night, but Fly-By-Night dared not let go.

I approached with care. Packer's arms were busy so he kicked to disembowel me. I chopped off what I could reach. Kick/slash, kick/slash. When he slowed down I killed him.

The air was thick with blood globules and red fog. We were *breathing* that futz. I got a cloth across my face. Fly-By-Night was snorting and sneezing. Paradoxical had placed meteor patches where Envoy had fired at me, but now he floated limp, maybe dying. I put him into the refuge and got him to zip it.

Fly-By-Night went to the controls. Minutes later we had gravity. All the scarlet goo settled to the floor and we could breath.

I had gone berserk. Never happened before. My mind was slow coming back. Why was there air?

Air. Think now: I slashed Envoy's suit open. He pressurized the cabin to save his life. Paradoxical must have come out then. The Jotok's needles knocked Envoy out despite pressure armor . . . why? Because Paradoxical was putting needles into flesh wherever I'd slashed away the Kzin's armor. And of course I hadn't got around to releasing Fly-By-Night until late—

I safed the blade. "Fly-By-Night? I believe this is yours."

He took it gingerly. "No witness would have guessed *that,*" he said, and handed it back. "Clean it in the waterfall."

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Kzinti custom: *never* borrow a w'tsai. If you do, return it clean. Waterfall?

He meant the big box. The word was a joke. I found a big blanket made of sponge, a tube attached. When I wrapped it around the w'tsai, it left the blade clean. I tried it on myself. The blanket flooded me with soapy water, then clean water, then sucked me dry. Weird sensation, but I came out clean.

The toilet looked like an oval box of sand with foot- and handholds around it, though the sand stayed put. *Later.*

A pressure suit was splayed like a pelt against the wall for easy access.

There was a status display. I couldn't read the glowing dots-and-commas, but the display must have told Packer there was air outside, and he'd come charging out—

I was starting to shake.

I emerged from the waterfall box into a howling gale. The blood was all gone. I couldn't even smell it. Fly-By-Night and Paradoxical were at the kitchen wall feeding butchered meat into the hopper.

"This kind of thing must be normal on Patriarchy spacecraft," Fly-By-Night said cheerfully. "Holes in walls and machinery, blood and corpses everywhere, no problem. This hopper would hold a Great Dane . . . a big dog, Mart. The cleanup subsystem is running smooth as a human's arse." He saw my shivering. "You have killed. You should feed. Must your meat be cooked? I don't know that we have a heat source."

"Don't worry about it."

"I must. I'm *hungry!*" Fly-By-Night smiled widely. "You wouldn't like me *hungry,* would you?"

"Futz, no!" A Sheathclaws local joke? I tried to laugh. Shivering.

Paradoxical was crawling over one of the control panels. "This kitchen was mounted separately. It is of Shashter manufacture, perhaps connected to the orange underground. It will feed slaves." It tapped at a surface, and foamy green stuff spilled into a plastic bag. Pond scum? It tapped again and the wall generated a joint of bloody meat. Again: it hummed and disgorged a layered brick.

A handmeal. While Paradoxical sucked at his bag of pond scum and Fly-By-Night devoured hot raw meat, I ate *three* handmeal bricks. They never tasted that good again.

Fly-By-Night had kept Packer's ears, one intact and one chewed to a nub, and Envoy's, both intact. These last he offered to me. "Your kill. Mart, I can dispose of—"

I took them. *My* kill.

We had taken the boat. Now what?

Fly-By-Night said, "The hard part will be persuading Meebrlee-Ritt that all is well here." His voice changed. *"Dominant One, all runs as planned but for the Telepath's behavior. Cowed by fear, he has soiled his refuge. Shall we clean him? It might be a trick—"*

Funny stuff. I was still shivering. "That's *very* good, *I* can't tell the difference, but Meebrlee-Ritt or Tech might."

"Guide me."

"I can't find the hologram stage."

Fly-By-Night touched something. This whole side of the main weapon became a window, floor to dome, a gaudy panorama across orange veldt into a city of massive towers. We'd been prisoned on the other side of it.

I said, "Tanj! He'll see every hair follicle. All right, I'm still thrashing

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around here. We've got Packer's pressure suit. The orders were to leave the, ah, prisoners in vacuum and falling. Try this—

"Whenever Meebrlee-Ritt calls, Packer is in the waterfall room." We hadn't heard enough of Packer's speech to imitate Packer. "LE Fly-By-Night, you're Envoy. You're in the pressure suit, we're in the vac refuges. We'll have to change the markings on the suit. I'd say Envoy's move is to wait patiently for his Alpha Officer to call." I didn't like the taste of this. "He could catch us by surprise."

"I should find an excuse to call *him*."

"Anything goes wrong, you give us air *instantly*. Paradoxical, have you found an emergency air switch?"

"Here, then here."

"Stet. Envoy, what's wrong with your voice?"

"Nothing," said Fly-By-Night.

"Well, there had better be."

"Stet," the Kzin said. "And we don't really want vacuum, do we? Let's try this instead. I'm calling because we're *not* in vacuum, and my voice—"

And his tale was better than mine, so we worked on that.

We spent some time looking those controls over, trying a few things. We found air pressure, air mix, emergency pressure, cabin gravity, thrust. Weapons would be harder to test. There were controls you could hit by accident without killing anyone, and that was done with virtual control panels. Weapons and defenses were hardwired buttons and switches, a few of them under locked cages, all stiff enough but big enough that I could turn them on or off by jabbing with the heel of my hand. Paradoxical couldn't move those at all.

The hologram wall was the telescope screen too. Paradoxical got us a magnificent view back into the Nursery Nebula, all curdles and whorls of colored light. It found *Odysseus* a light-hour behind us, under spin and falling free with no sign of motive power, only a chain of corridor lights and the brighter glow of the lobby. That didn't tell us if they still had hyperdrive. They couldn't use it yet.

Ahead was nothing but distant stars. We had to be approaching flat space, where *Stealthy-Mating* could jump to hyperdrive.

Fly-By-Night was wearing Envoy's pressure suit. The markings were right. He would keep the right sleeve hidden. We had cut off part of the helmet, raggedly, to obscure his features. Now Fly-By-Night tapped at the kitchen wall. It disgorged a soft, squishy dark red organ that might have been a misshapen human liver. He smeared blood over his face and chest, then into the exposed ear.

My shivering became a violent shudder. Fly-By-Night looked at me in consternation. "LE Mart? What's wrong?"

"Too much killing."

"*Two* enemies is too much? Get out of camera view, then. Are we ready?"

"Go."

Meebrlee-Ritt snarled, "Envoy, this had best be of great interest. We prepare for hyperdrive."

"Dominant One, the timing was not of my choosing," Fly-By-Night bellowed into the oversized face. "The human attacked while Packer was visiting the waterfall. I have killed the telepath's slave—"

"The Jotok is dead?"

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Fly-By-Night cringed. "No, Dominant One, no! Only the man. The Jotok lives. Telepath lives."

"The man is nothing. Telepath did not purchase the man! Is Packer functional, and are you?"

"Packer is well. I have nosebleeds, lost lung function, lost hearing. The man had a projectile weapon, a toy, but he damaged my helmet. I managed to put the cabin under pressure. Packer keeps watch on Telepath. Shall I return the cabin to vacuum? One of us would have to remain in the waterfall."

"Set Packer at the controls. What can he ruin while there is nothing to fly? Maintain free fall. You and Packer trained for free fall, our prisoner did not. You, Envoy, talk to Telepath. Learn what he desires, what he fears."

Cringe. "Dominant One, I shall."

Again we faced an electromagnetic cannon. I said, "Good. Really good."

Space around me winked like an eye. I caught it happening and looked at the floor. Fly-By-Night looked up, and blinked at the distortion. "Mart, I don't think . . . Mart? I'm blind."

Paradoxical was in a knot, his arms covering all of his eyes. I said, "Maybe you'd better take Paradoxical into the waterfall and stay there."

"Lost! Confused! Blind! How do you survive this?" the Jotok demanded. "How does any LE?"

"They'll close off the windows on *Stealthy-Mating*. I don't see how to do that in here. I guess they leave the boat empty if they can. Fly-By-Night, lower your head. Look at the floor. See the floor? Hold that pose."

"Stet."

I got under Paradoxical and he wrapped himself around me, sixty pounds of dry skinned octopus. I eased him onto Fly-By-Night's shoulders until he clung. "Gravity's on, right? Just crawl on around to the waterfall. Don't look up."

In hyperdrive something unmeasurable happens to electromagnetic phenomenon, or else to organs that perceive them: eyes, optic nerves, brains. A view of hyperspace is like being born sightless. The Blind Spot, we call it.

In the waterfall room we straightened up and stretched. Fly-By-Night said, "None of us can fly—"

"No. We're passengers. Stowaways. Relax and let them do the flying."

Paradoxical asked, "How can any mind guide a ship through this?"

I said, "There are species that can't tolerate it. Jotoki can't. Maybe puppeteers can't; most of them never leave their home system. Humans can use a mass pointer, a psionics device to find our way through hyperspace, as long as we don't look into the Blind Spot directly. But that's . . . well, part of a psionics device is the operator's mind. Computers don't see anything. Kzinti don't either. There are just a few freaky Kzinti who can steer through the Blind Spot directly."

"It is the Patriarch's blood line," Paradoxical said. "After the first War with Men, when Kzinti acquired hyperdrive, they learned that most cannot astrogate through hyperspace. Some few can. The Patriarch paid with names and worlds to add their sisters and daughters to his harem. Today the -Ritts can fly hyperspace."

Fly-By-Night said, "Really?"

"It happened long after your folk were cut off. LE Graynor, I did research on more than just you. Of course you see the implications? Meebrlee-Ritt must fly *Stealthy-Mating*. He will be under some strain, possibly at the edge

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of his sanity. Tech must see him in that embarrassing state. Envoy and Packer need not, and no prisoner should."

"He won't call?" I made it a question.

"He would not expect answer. Packer and Envoy would be hiding in the Waterfall," Paradoxical said.

That satisfied us. We were tired.

For three days we lived in the waterfall room.

One Kzin would have crowded the waterfall. With a man and a Jotok it was just that much more crowded. The smell of an angry Kzin made me jumpy. I couldn't sleep that way, so a high wind was kept blowing at all times.

We used the sandpatch in full view of each other. There were ribald comments. The Jotok was very neat. Fly-By-Night covered his dung using gloved feet and expected me to do the same, but it wasn't needed. The magnetized "sand" churned and swallowed it to the recycler.

Somebody had to come out for food. It developed that nobody could do that but me.

Our talk ranged widely.

Fly-By-Night never told us how he had reached Fafnir, nor even how he had passed through Customs. He did tell us something about the two who had come with him on their name quests. "I left Nazi Killer still collecting computer games and I set out to buy a Jotok—"

"What kind of name is 'Nazi Killer'?"

"It's an illicit game. Our First Sire's children found it among exercise programs in *Angel's Pencil*. Nazi Killer is very good at it. On Shasht he bought improved games and modern computers and waldo gloves for Kzinti hands, thinking these would earn his name."

"Go on."

"Maybe he's already home. Maybe the Longest War caught him. He would not have survived that. As for me, I wasted time searching out medical techniques to heal my broken bones. Such practice has only evolved for Humans! Kzinti still keep their scars. Customs differ.

"But Grass Burner got what *he* wanted. Kittens!"

"Kittens?"

"Yes, six unrelated, a breeding set. On Sheathclaws there are only photos and holos of cats, and a library of tales of fantasy cats, and children who offer a Kzin kit a ball of yarn just because it makes their parents angry, nobody remembers why. Cats will get Grass Burner his name. But we remember Jotoks too. Paradoxical, if two species are smarter than one, three should be smarter yet. You will earn my name, if we can reach Sheathclaws."

I snapped out of a nightmare calling, "What was its name? *Stealthy-Mating?*"

"We were asleep," Paradoxical complained. "We love sleeping in free fall. Back in the lake. But we wake and are still a self."

"Sorry." I almost remembered the dream. A lake of boiling blood, Kzinti patrolling the shores, wonderfully desirable human women in the shadows beyond. I was trying to swim. The pain was stunning, but I was afraid to come out.

Broken blood vessels were everywhere on my body. It hurt enough to ruin my sleep.

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It was our fourth morning in hyperdrive.

"*Sraff-zisht,*" said Paradoxical.

"Pleasemadam, seek interstellar spacecraft local to Fafnir, Kzinti crew, Heroes' Tongue name *Sraff-zisht*. Run it."

Fly-By-Night woke. He said, "Make a meat run, Mart."

When I went out for food, we detached the shower blanket so I could use it as a shield. Meebrlee-Ritt had ordered us to keep the boat in free fall. No way could we be *really* sure he wouldn't call. I had to use handholds. I'd made a net for the food.

My computer dinged while we were eating. We listened:

Sraff-zisht was known to the Shasht markets, and to Wunderland too. The ship carried red meat to Fafnir and lifted seafood. At Wunderland, the reverse. Crew turnover was high. They usually stayed awhile. This trip they'd lifted light and early.

"*Sraff-zisht* is not armed," I said. I'd hoped it was true, but now I knew it. "Wunderland customs is careful. If they never found weapons or mounts for weapons, they're not there. We have the only gun!"

"*Yes!*" Fly-By-Night's fully extended claws could stop a man's heart without touching him.

"I've been thinking," I said. "There *has* to be a way to close that window strip. A Kzinti crew couldn't hide out in here! They'd tear each other to pieces!"

"I knew that. It's too small," Fly-By-Night said. "I just didn't want to go out there. Must we?"

We three crawled out with the shower blanket over us, Paradoxical riding the Kzin's shoulders. We stayed under the blanket while we worked the controls. I felt like a child working my flatscreen under the covers after being sent to bed.

There was a physical switch under a little cage with a code lock. None of us had the code. The switch wasn't a self-destruct. We *knew* where *that* was. When we ran out of options I sliced the cage away with the w'tsai, and flipped the switch.

From under the blanket we saw the shadows changing. I peeked out. Lost my vision, lost even my memory of vision . . . saw the edge of a shield crawling across the last edge of window.

If Meebrlee-Ritt had called earlier, he would have seen us flying hyperspace with windows open. Some mistakes you don't pay for.

"I think you'd better spend a lot of time in disguise and out here," I told Fly-By-Night. I saw his look: better not push that. "The next few days should be safe, but we should practice getting a disguise *on* you. Meebrlee-Ritt *will* call when he drops us out, and he *will* expect an answer, and he *will not* expect you to be still covered with blood and half hidden in ripped-up armor. Home is an eighteen to twenty day trip, they said. Ten to go, call it three in hyperspace."

The Kzin was tearing into a joint of something big. "Keep talking."

"We need to paint you. Envoy had a smooth face, no markings except for what looked like black eyebrows swept *way* up."

"What would you use for paint?"

"The kitchens on some of the Nakamura Lines ships offered dyes for Easter eggs. Then again, they went bankrupt. What have we got? Let's check out the kitchen wall."

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Choices aboard *Sraff-Zisht*'s boat were sparse. One variety of handmeal. Paradoxical's green sludge. Twenty settings for meat . . . "Fly-By-Night, what *are* these?"

"Ersatz prey from Kzin, I expect. Not bad, just strange."

They weren't all meat. We had two flavors of blood, and a milky fluid. "Artificial milk with diet supplements," Fly-By-Night told us, "to treat injuries and disease. Adults wouldn't normally use it."

Three kinds of fluids. Hot blood—"Is one of these human?"

"I wouldn't know, and that's one damn rude question to ask someone you have to live with—"

"I'm sorry. What I—"

"—for the next nine to ten days. If I get through this they'll *have* to give me a name."

"I just want to know if it coagulates."

Silence. Then, "Intelligent question. I've been on edge, Mart."

I didn't say that Kzinti are born that way. "Ease up on the cappuccino."

"We should thicken this. Mix it with something floury. Mush up a handmeal?"

The handmeals would pull apart. We worked with the layers: a meatlike paté, a vegetable paté, something cheesy, shells of hard bread. The bread stayed too lumpy: no good. Cheese thickened the blood. One kind of blood did coagulate. We got a thick fluid that could be spread into a Kzin's fur, then would get thicker. Milk lightened it enough, but then it stayed too liquid. More cheese?

We covered Fly-By-Night in patches everywhere, except his face, which we didn't want to mess up yet. This latest batch looked good where we'd spread it on his belly. I gave him a crossed fingers sign and worked it into his face.

Not bad.

We tried undiluted blood for the eyebrows. Too pale. Work on that later. I stood back and asked, "Paradoxical?"

"The marks weren't symmetrical," Paradoxical said. "You tend to want him to look too human. They're not eyebrows. Trail that right one almost straight up—"

"You'd better do it."

He worked. Presently he asked, "Mart?"

"Good!"

That was all Fly-By-Night needed. He set us spinning as he jumped for the waterfall room. We gave him an hour to dry off, because the shower blanket didn't suck up all the water, and another to calm down. Then we started over.

We couldn't get the eyebrows dark enough.

Finally we opened up a heating element in the kitchen wall, hoping we wouldn't ruin anything, and used it to char one of Envoy's ears. We used the carbon black to darken Fly-By-Night's "eyebrows." We bandaged one ear ("exploded by vacuum").

Then we made him wait, and talk.

"*Sraff-Zisht* drops back into Einstein space. There's an alarm. Do we get a few minutes? Does Meebrlee-Ritt clean himself up before he shows himself? Does he want a nap?"

"I was not raised among the children of the Patriarch."

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"He's dropped us out in the inner comets. That's a huge volume. He's not worried about any stray ship that happens along, but he might want to check on *us*. He still has to worry that the big bad telepath has murdered his crew. Fly-By-Night? Massacres are routine?"

"Duels, I think, and riots. Mart, the cleanup routines are very simple. Any surviving crew with a surviving fingertip could set them going."

"Meebrlee-Ritt calls. Right away?"

"He will set a course into Home system. Then he will make himself gorgeous. Let the lesser Kzinti wait. Count on forty minutes after we enter Einstein space."

"Stet. He calls. Envoy's all cleaned up. Big bandage on his ear. What is Envoy's attitude?"

Fly-By-Night let his claws show. Kzinti do sweat, but we'd cooled the cabin. His makeup was holding. "Half mad from sensory deprivation, still he must cringe before his alpha officer. Repress rage. Meebrlee-Ritt might enjoy that. Change orders just to shake up Envoy."

"Cringe," I said.

Fly-By-Night pulled himself lower in his chair. His ear flattened, his lips were tight together.

"Good. Envoy wouldn't *eat* in front of Meebrlee-Ritt—?"

"No!"

"Our makeup wouldn't stand up to that."

"No, and I promise not to eat the makeup!"

We kept him talking. I wanted to see how long the makeup would last. I wanted to see if he'd go berserk. A little berserk wouldn't hurt, in a Kzin who had been trapped in sensory deprivation for many days, but *he had to remember his lines*.

Three hours later . . . *he* didn't crack, but the makeup started to. We sent him off to get clean.

Morning of the ninth day. I couldn't stop chattering.

"We'll drop out of hyperspace at the edge of Home system. We almost know when. There is only one speed in hyperdrive—" though Quantum Two hyperdrive is hugely faster and belongs to another species. "If *Sraff-Zisht* has been traveling straight toward Home at three days to the light year, we'll drop out in . . ."

"Four hours and ten minutes," Paradoxical said.

"The jigger factor is, *where* does Meebrlee-Ritt drop us out? Hyperdrive takes 'flat' space. If there are masses around to distort space, the ship's gone. Pilots are *very* careful not to get too close to their target sun. *Really* cautious types aim *past* a target system. Just what kind of pilot is Meebrlee-Ritt?"

"Your pronunciation is terrible," said Fly-By-Night.

"Yah?"

"Crazy Kzin. Dive straight in. Cut the hyperdrive ten ce'meters short of death. Let our intrinsic velocity carry us straight into the system. Mart, that is the only decent bet."

"Where is Packer? *Still* in the waterfall?"

"I will think of something."

"I want you in makeup two hours early."

"No."

"H—"

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"*Yes,* he might drop out short! But he might circle! He might enter Home system at an angle. Our window of opportunity has to slop over on either side." Fly-By-Night's speech was turning mushy again, lips pulling far back, *lots* of gleaming white teeth. Even Envoy didn't look like that. Sheathclaws must have good dental hygiene.

"We *know* that he will not show himself to Envoy and Packer after nine days of letting the Blind Spot drive him crazy and ruin his hairdo. You'll have forty minutes to make me beautiful."

"Stet. What next? Decelerate for a week. Drop the boat somewhere, maybe in the asteroids, without changing course. The Home asteroid belt is fairly narrow. Still plenty of room to hide.

"They'll bring you aboard ship just before they drop the boat. Because you're dangerous. Thanks." He'd dialed me up a handmeal. "You're dangerous, so they'll keep you in free fall until the last minute. If we're wrong about that, we could get caught by surprise."

"Bring me aboard? How does that work? Order Envoy and Packer to stun me and pull me through the small lock? We can't *do* that. They're dead!"

"Lure the technology officer in here."

"How?"

"Don't know. Make up a story. Let's just get through dropout without getting caught."

A recording spoke. A computer whined, "Dominant Ones, we have returned to the universe. Be patient for star positions."

Paradoxical started the curtain retracting. Stars emerged. I went to the kitchen wall and dialed up what we needed.

The recording reeled off a location based on some easy-to-find stars and clusters. Paradoxical listened intently. "Home system," he said. "We will use the telescope to find better data. Can you do that alone?"

"Yah." We'd practiced. In free fall we were still a bit awkward, but I mixed the basic makeup, then added char to a smaller batch. A bit more? *All?* Ready. "You do the eyebrows, Doc."

"First we will finish this task."

Fly-By-Night held still while I rubbed the food mixture into his facial fur.

Paradoxical said, "Graviton wake indicates a second ship."

"Damn!" Fly-By-Night snarled. I flung myself backward; my seat web caught me.

Paradoxical said, "We find nothing in visible light."

"Don't move your mouth. Aw, Fly-By-Night!" He was in an all-out snarl, trying to talk and failing. Drool made a darker runnel. "If Meebrlee-Ritt saw *that* he wouldn't care *who* you are. Lose the teeth!"

Fly-By-Night relaxed his mouth. "Your extra week is down the toilet, Mart. They're making pickup here and now."

The makeup had stayed liquid. "Paradoxical, give him eyebrows." I brushed out the drool, then settled myself out of camera range. They'd given me the flight controls. Paradoxical on astrogation, Fly-By-Night on weapons.

Paradoxical finished his makeup work and moved out of camera range, fifteen minutes ahead of schedule. I asked, "Shall we talk? Is this second ship just an escort?"

"No. Why make *Sraff-Zisht* conspicuous? Transfer the telepath, then move on to Home. This new ship runs to some outer world, or to Kzin itself—"

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Meebrlee-Ritt popped up bigger than life and fourteen minutes early. He demanded, "Envoy, is the telepath well?"

Fly-By-Night flinched, then cringed. "The telepath is healthy, Dominant One. I judge that he is not in his right mind."

"The Jotok? Yourself? Where is Packer?"

"The Jotok amuses themself with a computer. I will welcome medical attention. Packer . . . Dominant One . . . Packer looked on hyperspace."

"He knew better!"

"Envoy" recoiled, then visibly pulled himself together. "Soon or late, Dominant One, every Hero looks. Wealth and a name and the infinite future, if he has sisters and daughters, if he can stay sane. Packer did not. He hides in the waterfall when I let him. Set him in a hunting park soon or he will die."

"That will not be our task. *Leap For Life* will be here soon. Transfer the boat to *Leap For Life*. Haste! No need to take Telepath out of his vacuum refuge. You will be relieved aboard *Leap For Life*."

"Yes, Dominant One!"

"Packer must guard the telepath. The telepath will attack now if ever."

"Yes—"

Meebrlee-Ritt was gone.

"We have it!" Paradoxical projected what he was seeing against the cannon casing.

Still distant, backlit by Apollo, Home's sun, a sphere nestled in a glowing arc of gamma ray shield, its black skin broken by holes and projections and tiny windows. Dots-and-commas script glowed brilliant orange. "We find heavy graviton wake. That ship is decelerating hard."

"Built in this century," Fly-By-Night said.

Sraff-Zisht dropped us free.

This was not much of a puzzle. I spun the boat, aimed at *Leap For Life* and said, "Shoot."

My hair stirred. Fly-By-Night's fur stood up and rippled. He said, "Done. Doc?"

"The graviton wake is gone. You burned out its thrusters."

I boosted us to put *Sraff-Zisht* between us and *Leap For Life*. *Leap For Life* had the weapons, after all. I set our gun on *Sraff-Zisht* and said, "Again."

"Done. I burned out something."

"Graviton flare," Paradoxical said, just as *Sraff-Zisht* vanished.

"Meebrlee-Ritt must have tried to return to hyperspace," Fly-By-Night said. "We burned out the hyperdrive. But he still has thrusters!"

I rotated the boat to focus the gun on the immobilized *Leap For Life*. "Projectiles. Shoot it to bits."

Fly-By-Night punched something. We heard the weapon adjusting, but he didn't shoot. "Why?"

I screamed, "They've got all the weapons, our *shield* has flown away—"

"Stet." The boat's lone weapon roared. It was right in the middle of the cabin/cargo hold. The noise was amazing. The boat recoiled: cabin gravity lurched to compensate. *Leap For Life* jittered and came apart in shreds.

"—And *they* don't have the hostages! And now it's one less tanj thing to worry about."

"Stet, stet, I understand!"

Paradoxical said, "We win."

We looked at the Jotok. He said, "We may report all that has happened,

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now, via laser broadcast to Home. We fly the boat to Home with our proofs. The law of Home can arrange to retrieve *Odysseus*. With his hyperdrive burned out, Meebrlee-Ritt is trapped in Home system. In the full glare of publicity he must follow the Covenants. He may trade his hostages for some other consideration such as amnesty, but they must be returned. Stet?"

"He's still got my family! But I think we can turn on the cabin futzy gravity now, *if* you don't mind—" I stopped because Meebrlee-Ritt, greatly magnified, was facing Fly-By-Night.

"Some such consideration," he mimicked us. "You look stupid, Telepath, covered with food. Only one consideration can capture my interest! Read my mind if you doubt me. Release my entourage and surrender! The hostages for yourself!"

Fly-By-Night's claw moved. No result showed except for Meebrlee-Ritt's widening eyes, but Fly-By-Night had given him a contracted view. He was seeing all of us.

"Lies! You killed my Heroes? Eeeeerg!" A hair-lifting snarl as Fly-By-Night lifted Packer's ear into view.

It seemed the right moment. I showed Envoy's surviving ear. "We had to use the other."

"Martin Wallace Graynor, you may buy back your hostages and your *life* by putting the telepath into my hands!"

It began to seem that Meebrlee-Ritt was mad. I asked, "Must I subdue him first?"

A killing gape was my answer. I asked, "And where would you take him then, with no hyperdrive?"

"Not your concern."

"We're going to call for help now. Over the next few hours all of Home system is going to know you're here. A civilized solar system *seethes* with telescopes. If you have allies in the asteroids, you can't go to them. You'd only point them out to the Home Rule."

"What if you never make that broadcast, LE Graynor? And I can . . . thaw . . . sss." He'd had a notion. He stepped out of range. Ducked back and fisheyed the view to show his whole cabin. The other Kzin, Tech, was at his workstation, watching.

A wall slid away. Through an aperture ten yards wide I could see a much bigger cargo hold and all of *Odysseus'* cargo modules. Meebrlee-Ritt moved to one of them, opened a small panel and worked.

Back he came. "I can reset the temperature on these machines. I thought you might wonder, but soon I will show you thawed fish. You cannot do to me what you did to *Leap For Life* without killing my hostages too. If you broadcast any message at all, I will set the third module thawing, and then I will show you thawed dead hostages."

I was sweating.

The Kzin aristocrat said, "Telepath . . . Fly-By-Night. I will give you a better name. Your prowess has earned a name even as an enemy. What is it we ask of you? Take a harem. Raise your sons. See your daughters grow up in the Patriarch's household. A life in luxury buys survival for sixty-four Human citizens.

"Think, then. I can wait. A boat's life support is not the match for an interstellar spacecraft. Or else—"

The mass of an interstellar spacecraft jumped into our faces. Meebrlee-Ritt was tiny in its window, huge in the hologram stage. He threw his head

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back, a prolonged screech, mouth gaping as wide as my head. Forced his mouth to close so he could ask, "Graynor, have you ever flown a spacecraft? Do you think you have the skill to keep me from ramming you?"

I said, "Yes. Space is roomy, and the telepath is *our* hostage. Doc, can you give me a deep-radar view of yon privateer?"

Paradoxical guessed what I meant. The mass outside our dome went transparent.

I looked it over. Fuel . . . more fuel . . . a bulky hyperdrive design from the last century. Gravity and reaction motors were also big and bulky. Skimpy cargo space, smaller cabin, and that tiny box shape must be a waterfall room just like ours.

I spun the boat. "You say I can't shoot?"

Meebrlee-Ritt looked up. He must have been looking right into our gun. "Pitiful! Are all Humans natural liars?"

Fine-tuning my aim, I said, "There *is* a thing you should know about us. If you eat prey that is infested . . . *whasht-meery* . . . you may be very sick, but it doesn't kill off your whole blood line. Shoot," I said to Fly-By-Night.

The gun roared. Meebrlee-Ritt's image whirled around. The boat recoiled: gravity imbalances swirled through my belly. In our deep-radar view the waterfall room became a smudge.

Then *Sraff-Zisht* was gone.

"We track him," Paradoxical said. "Gravitons, heavily accelerating, *there*."

A green circle on the sky marked nothing but stars, but I spun the boat to put cross hairs on it. "Electromagnetic," I shouted.

"Am I a fool?" The gun grumbled, shifting from projectile mode.

"Graviton wake has stopped."

Fly-By-Night cried, "I have not fired!"

I said, "He's got no hyperdrive—"

Paradoxical said, "Gravitons again. He will ram."

The room wobbled, my hair stood on end, Fly-By-Night fluffed out into a great orange puffball. "Graviton wake is gone," Paradoxical said.

I moved us, thirty gee lateral, in case his aim was good.

Sraff-Zisht, falling free, shot past us by two miles. I chased it down. Whim made me zip in alongside the ship's main window. Grinning like a Kzin, I screamed, "*Now* wait us out!"

In the hologram stage Meebrlee-Ritt hugged a stack of meteor patches while he pulled on the waterfall door. Vacuum inside would be holding the door shut. We could see Tech working his way into a pressure suit, but Meebrlee-Ritt hadn't thought of that yet. He turned to look at the camera, at us.

He cringed. Down on his belly, face against the floor.

Paradoxical set our com laser on Home. The lightspeed lag was several hours, so I just recorded a help call and sent it. Then, as we'd have to anyway, we three began recording the whole story. That too would arrive before we could—

Tech stood above Meebrlee-Ritt, watching us. When Fly-By-Night looked at him he cringed, a formal crouch. "Dominant One, what must we do?"

Fly-By-Night said, "Tend your cargo until you can be towed to Home. Meebrlee-Ritt, also I place in your charge. Set your screamer and riding lights so [illegible] can be found. You may dream of betrayal but do not act on it. You know what I am. I know *who* you are. Your hostages' lives will buy back your blood line."

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He'd said he couldn't read minds. I still think he was bluffing.

A century ago the new settlers had towed a moonlet from elsewhere into geosynchronous orbit around Home. Home Base was where incoming ships arrived, and where they thawed incoming Ice Class passengers.

The law had business with hijackers and kidnappers; we were their witnesses. We were the system's ongoing news item. Media and the law were waiting.

I rapidly judged that anchorpersons and lawyers were my fate. The only way to hide myself was to sign with Home Information Megacorp and talk my head off until my public grew bored.

If Carlos Wu tried to call me they'd be all over him too. I hoped he'd wait it out.

Sraff-Zisht we had left falling free through Home system. Home Rule had to round up ships to bring it back. It took two of their own, four Belters acting for the bounty, and one shared by a media consortium, all added to the several they sent after *Odysseus*. It took them ten days to fetch *Sraff-Zisht.*

For eight days I was questioned by Home and ARM law and by LE Wilyama Warbelow, the anchor from Home Information Megacorp. Wilyama was wired for multisensory recording. What she experienced became immortal.

They'd wanted to do that to me too.

The last two days were a lull: I was able to more or less relax, and even see a bit of the captured asteroid. Then *Sraff-Zisht* descended on tethers to Home Base, and everybody wanted Mart Graynor.

The Covenant against sensory deprivation as torture has long since been interpreted as the right to immediate trial, not just for Kzinti but throughout human space, a right not to be evaded. I was to submit to questioning by Meebrlee-Ritt and Tech, by their lawyer and everyone else's, while two hundred Ice Class passengers were being thawed elsewhere.

I screamed my head off. Cameras were on me. The law bent. When they thawed the hostages from *Sraff-Zisht,* I was there to watch.

My wife and child weren't there.

And we all trooped off to use the holo wall in the Outbound Enterprises Boardroom.

The prisoners watched us from an unknown site. It didn't seem likely they'd burst through the holo wall and rip us apart. Meebrlee-Ritt's eyes glittered. Tech only watched.

The court had restricted the factions to one advocate each. All I had for company was Sirhan, a police commissioner from Home Rule; Judge Anita Dee; Handel, an ARM lawyer; Barrister, a runty Kzin assigned as advocate to the prisoners; a hugely impressive peach-colored Kzin, Rasht-Myowr, representing the Patriarch; and anchorperson Wilyama Warbelow.

Judge Dee told the prisoners, "You are each and together accused of violations of local law in two systems, and of the Covenants of 2505 at Fafnir. A jury will observe and decide your fate."

LE Barrister spoke quickly. "You may not be compelled to speak nor to answer questions, and I advise against it. I am to speak for you. Your trial will take at least two days, as we must wait for other witnesses, but no more than four."

Meebrlee-Ritt spoke in Interworld. "We have followed the Covenants. Where are my accusers?"

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They all looked at me. I said, "Gone."

"Gone?"

"Fly-By-Night and Paradoxical and I signed an exclusive contract with Home Information Megacorp for our stories. I got a room here at Home Base. They'll thaw my family here, after all." If they lived. "We gave LE Warbelow," I nodded; the anchor bowed, "an hour's interview, presumed to be the first of many. Fly-By-Night and Paradoxical transferred to a shuttle. The Patriarch's representative missed them by just under two hours. They disappeared on the way down."

I've never doubted their destination. Fly-By-Night had come to Home for a reason, and he never told anyone *who* had arranged their transport to Fafnir.

The law raised hell, as if it were my fault they were gone. Warbelow was more sensible. She paid for my room, a major expense that wasn't in our contract. With the aliens gone, I had become the only game in town.

They got their money's worth. Mart Graynor emerged as a braggart with a Fafnir accent I'd practiced for two years. I played the same tune while various lawyers and law programs questioned me. I hoped nobody would see a resemblance to documentaries once made by Beowulf Shaeffer.

Barrister reacted theatrically. "Gone! Then who is witness against my clients?"

"We have LE Graynor, Your Honor," Sirhan said, speaking for Home Rule, "and the crew and passengers of *Odysseus* will be called. *Odysseus* had to be chased down in the Kuiper belt, the inner comets, and towed in. They'll be arriving tomorrow. Any of the passengers might press claims against the defendants."

The judge said, "LE Handel?"

The ARM rep said, "The Longest War threatens all of human space. We need what these Kzinti can tell us. They've violated the Covenants. There was clear intent to store humans as reserves of meat—"

"This was a local act against Homer citizens!" Sirhan said.

Judge Dee gestured at the big peach-colored Kzin, who said, "The Patriarch's claim is that Meebrlee-Ritt is no relative of his and has no claim to his name. I am to take possession—"

Meebrlee-Ritt leapt at us, bounced back from the wall—or from a projection screen—and screamed something prolonged. "I flew outside the universe!" said my translator. "Who can do that? Only the -Ritt! In cowardice does the Patriarch disclaim my part in the Long War!" He changed to Interworld: "LE Graynor knows! Nine days through hyperspace, accurately to my rendezvous!"

"I am to take possession and return him for trial, and his Heroes too. I must have Envoy's ear, Graynor, unless you can establish a kill. Nameless One, Kzinti elsewhere can fly hyperspace. Females of your line may have reached the -Ritt harem. What of it?"

"My line descends from the Patriarch! I violated no Covenants!"

The runty Kzin who was his advocate caught the judge's eye. He too spoke Interworld. "To properly represent the prisoners I must speak with them alone and encrypted to learn their wishes. I expect we will fight extradition. Rasht-Myowr," a prolonged howl in the Heroes' Tongue. The Patriarch's designate was trying to loom over him. My translator buzzed static. The runty Kzin waited, staring him down, until the big one stepped back and sheathed his claws.

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Barrister said, "Violation of the Covenants would hold my clients here in any case, but none of these claims has any force until we can interview the victims. *Odysseus'* crew and passengers will reach Home Base tomorrow. We have only LE Graynor's word for any of this."

"He's telling the truth, though," I said.

Meebrlee-Ritt barked his triumph. The ARM man said, "Futz, Graynor!"

Judge Dee asked, "LE Graynor, are you familiar with the Covenants of 2505?"

"As much as any law program. I've examined them half to death."

"Did you see violations?"

"No. I thought I had. I thought Packer must have shot out *Odysseus'* hyperdrive and hyperwave, putting *Odysseus* at unacceptable risk, but it's clear he didn't. Hyperdrive got *Odysseus* into the Home comets, and they called ahead via hyperwave as soon as they were out of the Nursery Nebula."

Rasht-Myowr's tail slashed across and back. "Your other claims fail! The false lord is mine, and his remaining Hero too!"

I said, "Whatever these two learned about Fly-By-Night and his companions, taking them back to Kzin for trial gives that to the Patriarch. On that basis I'd keep them, if I was an ARM."

"But you're testifying," the ARM said bitterly, "that they didn't violate the Covenants."

"Yah."

"Mine! And Envoy's ear," Rasht-Myowr said. "His *one* ear. Did you kill him?"

"I killed them both. Do you need details? Fly-By-Night was trapped in his vac refuge. We'd just rounded Turnpoint Star and Envoy was flying the ship. Difficult work, took his full attention. Back turned, free fall, crash web holding him in his chair. I had Fly-By-Night's w'tsai." The police had already confiscated that. "He would have killed me if he'd released his crash web in time."

"He would have killed you anyway! Why would you keep only one ear?"

For an instant I couldn't speak at all. Then I barely remembered my accent. "I h-heated one for charcoal to paint Fly-By-Night. Packer was wrestling Fly-By-Night when I chopped *him* up, so Fly-By-Night got the ear. He chewed off the other one. They stole, *you* stole my wife and child and unborn, my *harem,* you *whasht-meery* son of a stray cat! I still haven't seen them alive. I memorized those *whasht-meery* Covenants. They only forbid my killing your relatives!"

"Duel me then!" Meebrlee-Ritt shouted. "Back turned, crash web locked, free fall, my claws only, *blunt* them if you like—"

"Barrister, you will silence your client or I will," the judge said.

"—And you armed! Prove you can do this!"

Meebrlee-Ritt, I decided, was trying to commit suicide. He didn't want to go with Rasht-Myowr. Let the Patriarch have him, I owed him nothing.

Almost nothing.

I said, "Judge Dee, if you'll let me ask a few questions, I may solve some problems here."

"You came to *be* questioned, LE Graynor. What did you have in mind?"

"Rasht-Myowr, if a violation of the Covenants can't be proved, then I take it these prisoners are yours—"

Judge Dee interposed. "They may be assessed for *substantial* property violations, Graynor. Rescue costs. A passenger ship turned to junk!"

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"I will pay the costs," Rasht-Myowr said.

I asked, "You'll take them back to your Patriarch?"

"Yah."

"They'll be tried publicly, of course."

The peach-colored Kzin considered, then said, "Of course."

"The court will have a telepath to question him? They always do."

"Rrr. Your point?"

"Would you let a telepath find out what Meebrlee-Ritt saw of the telepaths of Sheathclaws? And learn how they live? *Really?*"

He didn't get it. I said, "Three hundred years living alongside Humans. Sharing their culture. Their schooling programs. Instead of theft and killing, hang gliding! Meebrlee-Ritt, tell him about Fly-By-Night."

The prisoner looked at the Patriarch's voice. He said, "I crawled on my belly for him."

Rasht-Myowr yowled. "With the -Ritt name on you? How dare you?"

"I meant it."

"Meant—?"

"Do you think I was born with no pride, to take and defend a name like mine? I found I could fly the Outsider hyperdrive! I knew that I must be a -Ritt. Then fortune favored me again. A telepath lost on Shasht, healthy and arrogant, the genetic line that will give us the Longest War!

"Even after questioning, crippled, Nazi Killer tore up one of my unwary Heroes so that we had to leave him. He *knew* things about me . . . but Nazi Killer was no threat. Frustrating that we had to kill him, but he'd told us how to retrieve another. It was Fly-By-Night and his slaves who stripped me of everything I am! He killed my Heroes. He *became* Envoy! Reduced my ship to a falling prison."

Rasht-Myowr demanded, "Technical Officer, is your alpha officer mad?"

Tech spoke simply; his dignity was still with him. "I followed the telepath's commands exactly. What he had done to us, to him I followed, how could *I* face him? With what weapons? But Fly-By-Night was not alone. Kzin and 'man and Jotok, *they* took our ears."

I hoped then that there were unseen defenses, that nobody would have set fragile humans undefended among these Kzinti. Rasht-Myowr turned on me a gaping grin that would not let him speak. His alien stench was not that of any creature of Earth, but I knew it was his rage.

"You can't take them back to the Patriarchy," I said to Rasht-Myowr. Because they had kept faith.

Quickpony and the Van Zild children were with me when Outbound Enterprises thawed two modules of passengers taken from *Odysseus*. The way they were wrapped, I couldn't tell who was who until Jeena was wheeled out of the cooker. We clung to each other and waited. If Jeena was alive, so was her mother.

We waited, ice in our veins, and she came. ○

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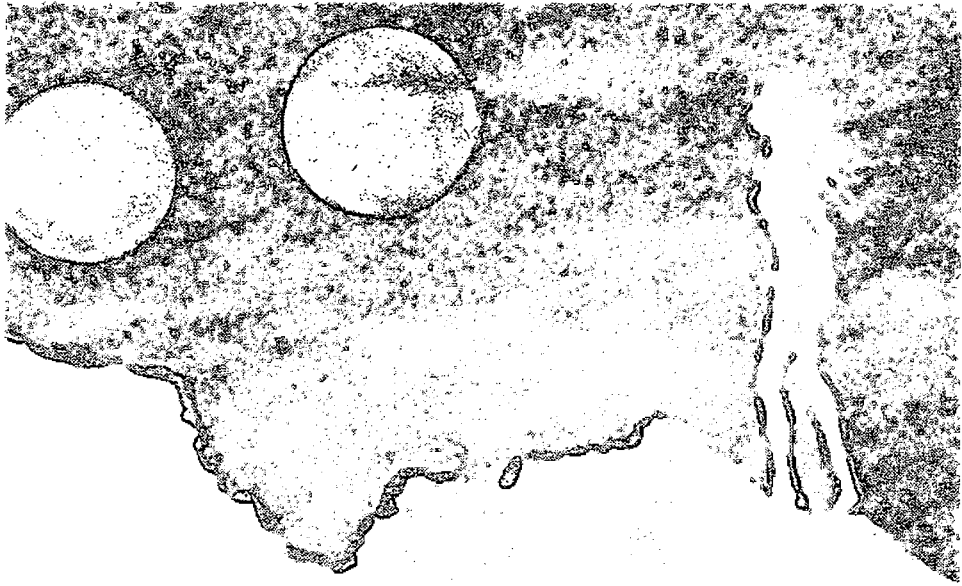

ANCESTORS' SONG

Liz Williams

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

Liz Williams has a Ph.D. in philosophy of science from Cambridge, and lives on the south coast of the United Kingdom. Her career has ranged from reading tarot cards on Brighton pier to working for an educational consultancy in Central Asia. Her short fiction publications include stories in *Interzone*, *The Third Alternative*, *Albedo*, *Visionary Tongue*, and *Terra Incognita*, and she is working on a novel. "Ancestors' Song" is her first story for *Asimov's*.

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1.

When Gher Ushuru is singing the Ancestors' Song as the vessel hurtles toward Yhi. He does not know that he is doing so, unless some slight sound filters down through the ocean of his dreams, nor is he aware that the Ancestors' Song has been echoing within the hollows of his head for some thirteen hundred years. The sides of the vessel are encrusted with ice and pitted with meteor strikes, but the vessel is singing, too. Ancient equipment hums slowly like a cold hive, just below the edge of hearing. It broadcasts the Ancestors' Song out into the void, leaving traces to sink into the static of passing solar systems, and causing children of the multitudinous labyrinth of worlds to blink, uneasy, in their sleep. But Rhen Gher Ushuru's song has gone unheard for over seven hundred years now, as the vessel leaves the galactic core and speeds out into the Reaches.

Gradually, the kabbalistic pattern of stars begins first to approximate, and then to fit, the configuration in the vessel's data banks. The vessel veers, spins and shifts, slowing as it nears a particular star system. Five worlds hang in seeming-below; the fourth is as yellow as an eye, mottled with dark uplands. The vessel has reached Yhi.

2.

The artist crouches at the foot of the darkridge, waiting for the huntress. He has been stalking her now for over a week and she has imprinted herself upon him, filling his head with images. Memories uncurl within his mind like blood through water: a footprint in the soft peat of the moor; the gleam of her eyes in the twilight; the scrape of her nails against bone. The artist is too wary of the huntress to allow himself to be seen, and perhaps too proud. He keeps upwind, padding patiently along the narrow streams that cross the moorland, and he sleeps on the resilient black moss that springs back into shape when he rises, betraying nothing. Leaving so little trace upon the face of the world both excites and frustrates him: he is used to delineating territory, making his mark on the Dreamtime. This patient, imperceptible journey is taking its toll on his nerves. The artist consoles himself with an image: the record of his journey that he will create on his return, made from the materials that will be most attractive to the huntress. And when he lures her to the bower, then she will understand. The thought of impressing the huntress in such a way makes the blood pound in the artist's head. But images of the journey alone will not be enough to lure her. He needs a focus for the work: something to catch her eye and draw her in. He needs prey.

3.

/Yhi/destination/termination of voyage/

The message sings down Rhen Gher Ushuru's neural pathways, its catalytic cues luring him from his long sleep. Ushuru wakes, to lie motionless. His long outline is dimly reflected in the glossy ceiling above, but it takes him a moment to realize that the reflection is of a human form, still longer

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to recognize that it is his own. Slowly, as awareness returns to him, the stasis mesh dissolves away until it lies in a glistening film across his skin. Its bubble breaks over his mouth and Ushuru takes a long, rasping first breath. Rising from the stasis couch, he walks unsteadily to the console mesh and activates the imager. Yhi the legendary, world of the lost, fills the screen. He can see its plains, its moors, its two icy moons. As though activated in turn, Rhen Gher Ushuru throws back his head and sings the last verses of the Ancestors' Song, hearing it tremble through the stale air of the cabin. His voice is rough and unfamiliar; he sings words that he has no memory of ever hearing. Crossed over his breast, his fingers begin to trace the spiral filigree of scars that cover every inch of his skin, etched onto his flesh over millennia by the mnemomechanisms of the vessel. Thus he learns of his journey, reminding himself of who he has been and learning what he has become. At last a fingertip reaches the place between his eyes, where a tiny drop of blood seeps out: a representation of the world of Yhi. Setting the navigation system to a landing point, Rhen Gher Ushuru begins to sing the song of his voyage, wondering and tentative at first, but then stronger and more confident as it progresses. The vessel soars down toward atmosphere.

4.

The huntress' movements have become languid now that she has made her kill and fed. She is heading down the long slope of the darkridge to where two more of her kind wait, reclining in the scanty scrub where the moors meet the golden grassland of the plains. The artist's fists clench in impotent frustration. The two who wait for her are males. He is too far away to see the warrior scars on their pale arms and foreheads, but he is close enough to see that they are large, and powerful. It is likely that they are the woman's brothers: the plains predators often travel in small family packs. She has brought them an offering from her hunt; a little limb hangs from the grassmesh across her shoulder, a remnant of the child she caught that morning. The artist shifts uneasily; hunger stirs him. But it is too dangerous to pursue the pack. He waits, watching, until the woman rejoins her siblings, greeting them with cuffs and cries, and then he turns back across the moorland toward his bower. But as he does so, there is a sound like the world ending. Something is coming down from the sky.

The artist has never seen anything like it before, but the sight stirs his soul. He watches, round eyed with wonder, as the glowing object drifts down toward the moor. Its vanes catch the last crimson light of the sun, glowing a deep, gilded red as they turn. Keeping at a safe distance, the artist watches as the thing settles into the moss. He waits for a little while longer, hoping it might do something amusing or strange, but the vanes fold away with complex delicacy and soon the thing becomes no more than a part of the twilight. Losing interest, the artist stands and lopes back toward his home.

5.

When morning comes, Rhen Gher Ushuru steps wonderingly from the vessel and takes a deep breath of the air of Yhi. He looks around him. Moor-

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land stretches as far as the western horizon. The ground is covered with soft black moss; a pool fringed with rushes quivers in the breeze. The air is warm, and smells of rain. To the east, he can see a long line of forest at the foot of a ridge. Cloud hides the high, distant peaks. Rhen Gher Ushuru puts out a trembling hand and touches the earth. He has stepped into Dreamtime: the ancient, eternal *now* of his ancestors. He is filled with relief, in finding the planet so unchanged from those first, early reports. He does a quick calculation: Yhi has now been colonized for some forty thousand years. More than enough time to ruin a world; cover its fair face with cities, blight the skies. He thinks of his own birthplace: aramite and steel beneath the plastic heavens. New Narrandera no longer seems real; he has stepped out of history, back into the present. If what he sees here is anything to go by, Yhi is still a world within its own morning. It seems his ancestors have kept to their ideals: to find a world still in its Dreamtime, to live their lives at one with Place. Rhen Gher Ushuru makes a swift, spontaneous decision, not wanting to risk the chance that he might change his mind. Stepping back into the vessel, he sets the appropriate mechanism, shoulders his bow and strides back out onto the moor. Then, he watches from a safe distance as the vessel is swallowed in a rosy billow of fire until nothing is left but a scorch mark on the moss. Ushuru takes a deep, ragged breath of mingled regret and relief. What he has just done is a folly of lunatic courage, but he cannot allow himself the luxury of escape. Now, he is committed to Yhi, and to his dream. Turning, he begins to walk toward his future.

6.

At last, the bower is almost complete. The artist sucks a bloody finger and gives a small, approving grunt of satisfaction. He cannot suppress a rush of pride. Since his return from his study of the huntress, he has been working hard to depict the story of his journey. Though he is incapable of expressing it in words, the artist's principal desire is to create something different from the bowers of his kindred. He is impatient with his memories of his past work: bowers filled with delicate choices of veined leaves, the starry dark flowers from the water forest, the artful stains and pigments of russet earth. Juvenile follies, aping the work of his father and brothers to lure the timid girls of the deep forest, all shy eyes and soft hands. He thinks of the nearest bower to his own: the home of a small, pale person, filled with shells and blossoms. The artist spits into the moss. Such vapid beauty will not attract the huntress. Desire hazes him: he remembers her speed, her strength, her bloodstained fingers and mouth. She needs boldness, passion, richness of color and texture. He has worked hard to create an appropriate vision. He steps across the threshold of the bower, pushing aside the ropes of bone-strung sinew, which clatter gently in the evening breeze with an old, dry sound. Redness fills his vision, a powerful contrast with the somberness of the surrounding territory. The bower smells strong, too; invading every sense. At the center, a complex network of woven boughs awaits an occupant. The artist has very clear ideas as to what he wants for his centerpiece. It should be a male, and a powerful one, to show off his own cunning and strength. It should be someone in their prime: the huntress will not want old meat, and to present her with a weakling child would merely insult her. Offering her a member of her own

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kindred is probably not a good idea, either, and the artist feels secretly rather alarmed at the prospect of catching and confining one of the plains predators. However, there are certain individuals who live in the deepforest: solitary, wary, and dangerous, but also rather decorative. One of those, the artist thinks, would do very well indeed. Armed with a sling shot and a net of sinew, he sets out for the deepforest.

7.

Rhen Gher Ushuru has discovered a place for a suitable camp: a hollow beneath a low crest of rock, close to a stream. He unloads his rations from the backpack and studies the sky. Yhi's sun is some way past its zenith. Ushuru sits with his back to the sunwarmed rock and muses on his journey so far.

He has seen nothing that gives any hint of civilization, and he marvels at the integrity of his ancestors, to leave their world so unspoiled. At the back of his mind, there is a very faint stirring of unease at the thought that the colony might simply have died out, that he is literally the only person alive on Yhi, but he dismisses this notion as being due to fatigue. He has come too far to entertain such negativity; his life to date has, after all, been spent in search of Yhi. He thinks back, with a faint smile, to his early childhood in New Narrandera; the stories told to him by his grandfather of the Dreamtime of Ancient Earth, and of the Rainbow Ancestors who set out for a world named Yhi, to make the Dreamtime come again. He thinks of the early reports filtered back across millennia: that Yhi had been successfully colonized, that people were reverting to the harmonious ways of the oldest ancestors. The great beauty of Yhi, so the reports said, was that there was so little competition for life. Yhi possessed no indigenous mammals, nor were there reptiles or birds. But by Rhen Gher Ushuru's day, nothing had been heard of Yhi for over nine thousand years, and thus was the idea of his great quest born, cradled in the artificial heart of New Narrandera. His own world is obsessed with history, with status; what better place to dream of, than a world that lacks either?

Now, that quest has come to fruition. Rhen Gher Ushuru gazes around him in contented contemplation, tempered with thoughts of what may have become of the colonists. Questions as to whether anyone remains on Yhi are soon answered. A scream—of fear, of rage, a human sound—splits the air. Before it has even faded away, Rhen is running up the ridge. A woman is standing with her back to a ridge of rock, her face contorted with fury and fear. She is naked, but her skin is so patterned with whorls of red and black that very little of the pale flesh is visible. Braided red hair falls to her waist; her front teeth are missing. Something is crashing through the scrub. Rhen Gher Ushuru cannot see what it is, but it sounds large. Perhaps things have changed over several thousand years. Thoughts of reconstruction, or imported wildlife, plague his mind. Then the thing in the bushes breaks cover and Rhen Gher Ushuru sees that it is human after all. Nails have become claws; teeth are pointed and sharp. It is male, and at least seven feet in height. It rushes toward the woman. Rhen Gher Ushuru makes his second critical decision of the day. He notches a laminate shaft to the optic sights of the bow, raises it, and fires. The arrow locks on target and the marauder drops, impaled neatly through the throat. Ushuru springs down from the

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ridge to land beside the woman. She turns, wide eyed. She stares for a moment at the twitching body of her assailant and then she spins in a swift pirouette and kicks Rhen Gher Ushuru in the stomach. Startled and pained, Ushuru drops to his knees. The iron-hard edge of her foot catches him on the side of the jaw and topples him into the scrub. The world darkens into nightmare.

When Ushuru comes round, the woman is nowhere to be seen. The marauder has been reduced to a bloody tangle of bones, and Ushuru himself has been stuffed securely into a crack in the rocks. He tries to free himself, but is too tightly wedged; a barrier of branches confine his knees and elbows. Despite his discomfort and unease, Rhen Gher Ushuru shakes his head with wonder as he thinks of the woman. Memory of her almost serves to banish fear.

8.

It is the artist's lucky day, though he himself has no notion of such a concept. The route to the deepforest has taken him along the edge of the scarp, and it is here that he sees the prey. The man has been wedged into a crevice of rock, in the manner of the plains predators. The artist cannot tell whether or not the prey is dead, but thinks it unlikely. The plains people generally treat their prey in such a manner when they have already made a kill, and merely want to establish a larder for some future meal. The artist glances warily about him, but sees no one. Turning his attention to the person below him, he notes that the male is large, with a curious leathery skin covering parts of his body. The flesh of his face and hands are a more normal hue; a broad dark face, reminiscent of the plant-gathering people of the foothills and marked with an intricacy of spiral patterns. Glossy black hair falls in a crest down his back. The artist shuffles forward, and the prey looks up at him. The artist sees bright eyes, with no trace of fear. The prey's lips draw back, obviously in warning. The artist notes with disappointment that the prey's teeth are the flat molars of a plant-eating person, but there is no doubt that they are in excellent condition. An image floats into the artist's inner eye: of the prey confined in the darkness of the bower. He is the perfect predator, betrayed only by his teeth. The artist decides to take a chance. With the aid of a nearby stone, and keeping his weapon close to hand, he hacks away the wedges and helps the stranger to stand up. The stranger throws back his head and emits a curious sequence of sounds, then he claps the artist on the shoulder and grasps his hand. The artist plucks a handful of fruit from his mesh and waves it in what he hopes is an enticing manner beneath the stranger's nose. Then he leads his new charge back up the slope to the bower.

9.

Rhen Gher Ushuru is delighted to have located a colonist, though he cannot help feeling that current circumstances could be improved upon. From the corner of his eye, he can see something disconcertingly wet and red. The place has the ripe smell of a meat locker. He does not precisely recall how he came to be in this position, but there is an aching lump on the back

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of his head, which is tilted backward. He is unable to move his arms or his legs. Strong capable hands are forcing his jaws apart and something blunt and rough is wedged into his mouth to keep it open. Ushuru swallows, fighting back a fear that exceeds anything he has ever experienced on New Narrandera. The face of his rescuer and captor appears above him: a long, sallow countenance, marked with bars of red earth. The man is silent. He frowns with concentration as he places a hard object against Ushuru's front teeth and begins to file. Ushuru struggles, to no avail. The process takes some considerable time. At intervals, Ushuru's rescuer takes care to drip water and the pulp of a sour fruit down his captive's throat. Whenever Ushuru winces with pain, his captor stops and strokes his head, making soothing noises. At last, the wedge is removed. Gratefully, Ushuru closes his sore mouth and tests his newly sharpened teeth with his tongue. A leaf is dangled above him. Ushuru opens his mouth and lets water drip down his throat. He does not notice the bitter aftertaste until it is already too late.

10.

Once the laborious process of transforming the plant-eater into something more menacing is over, and the prey is safely confined within the cage, the artist goes outside and sits down on a convenient stone to chew on a mouthful of dreaming root and watch the sun go down. He is extremely satisfied with the situation to date. Now, all that needs to be done is to attract the huntress.

He can see the small pale person approaching from the forest's edge, absorbed in gathering the shells of the snails that collect beneath the outcrops of moss. The artist snorts as he thinks of the pale person's shadowy bower, gleaming faintly against the dark wall of the forest. Images involving weakness and ineffectuality drift through the artist's contemptuous mind. The pale person gives him an anxious glance as he approaches, but the artist ignores him.

Inside his own bower, the prey is making sounds with his mouth again. The artist is aware of a new unease: *what if the prey breaks free? What if the huntress has moved on?* These thoughts generate so much anxiety that the artist simply rejects them, storing the unsettling images in some latent part of his mind; consigning them to dreaming.

Before him, the twilight moorland seems to ebb and flow like a tide as the dreaming root begins to take hold. The artist's awareness spreads out to encompass the entirety of place: everything transformed into a seamless whole, no separation between himself and the moorland; the songs of dreaming marking each stone, each pool. The world appears to the artist as a multidimensional map, represented in a fluid sequence of images, of which he himself is not the center, but an integral aspect. As he dreams, it seems to him that he can see the huntress, moving swiftly through the dusk, scenting blood, and the artist smiles. He begins to set the lure: imbuing the world with significance, endowing a stone with a sudden, intriguing aspect to catch her eye; causing a leaf to fall enticingly in her path; reeling her in. Slowly, patiently, he watches as she comes, and after a long time, when the world is just at the very edge of darkness, he breaks the dream and looks up, to see her standing on the ridge above him.

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11.

Rhen Gher Ushuru is dismayed to find himself confined in a narrow cage of what appears to be black bamboo. His wrists and ankles are tightly bound with sinew. What a baffling adventure, Ushuru thinks, yet somehow—satisfying. Imagine how disappointed he would have been had he arrived on Yhi to find a replica of his own hyper-civilized society, filled with gracious, brittle elegance. Yhi is raw, unexpected, sufficiently entrancing to combat the possibility of incipient death. And as Ushuru faces that very real possibility, he finds to his amazement that it no longer matters. His captor has clearly ensnared him for a purpose; the grisly objects around him are arranged in a way that suggests significance. If Ushuru is to die, then it seems that his death will have meaning, and therefore dignity. He is serving a role in Dreamtime; his individuality is becoming translated into archetype. The revelation that his fear of his own death is no longer important to him in no way diminishes Ushuru's determination to survive, however.

He has no idea where his strange captor has vanished to. And then there is a sharp, scuffling sound from the entrance to the bower. Bones rattle and clatter as the captor races in. Someone snarls. Rhen Gher Ushuru's shaved eyebrows elevate to the top of his forehead. The red-haired huntress is standing before him, his captor close behind. The woman gives Ushuru a searing glance, and spits. Turning, she gives a slashing, backhand blow to the captor's head. He falls, wailing, onto the soft earth floor. The woman reaches out and overturns the bamboo cage. Bound at wrists and ankles, Ushuru cannot move, but invigorated by her aggression he snaps at her hand with his newly sharp teeth. The woman growls. Razor nails score Ushuru's cheek. In an instant of clarity, Ushuru thinks he understands. The captor has stolen the woman's prey—himself—and she is furious. He shuffles rapidly backward, trying to get out of reach. Hissing, the woman springs. Ushuru head-butts her, and she sits back, momentarily dazed. Then the captor pushes her to one side. Fumbling with Ushuru's bonds, he hauls Ushuru to his feet. It is clear to Ushuru that things are not going as planned for his captor. The man cowers behind him. The woman scrambles to her feet, spitting. She kicks out at Ushuru, but he grasps her ankle and throws her. Within the instant, she is back on her feet. It rapidly becomes apparent that she outmatches both of them. She is lighter than Ushuru, but much faster. The captor has evidently decided that discretion might be preferable to a messy death. He flees from the bower, and Ushuru, driven by adrenaline, follows. Captor and captive sprint out across the moor, temporarily of one mind. Ushuru can hear the woman close behind, her footsteps drumming on the earth and moss of the moor. His captor is ahead of him now, bolting for a break of fronded trees. Their ferny coils catch the light of Yhi's twin moons, and something large and ghostly gleams ahead. The captor catches his foot on a branch and falls; Ushuru helps him up, turning to face their pursuer, who by now must surely be upon them. But as Ushuru turns, he sees that the woman has stopped dead in her tracks. She is gazing straight ahead, to where something gleams in the moonlight.

Ushuru sees that it is a second bower: shimmering with white flowers, shells catching the light of the moon, an antithesis of the macabre bone-decked place that they have just left. In the dim light, the woman's face has assumed a strangely wistful expression. Ignoring her prey, she strides forward toward the bower. Someone small and frail comes out, and stares. The woman holds out her hands, and walks inside. She does not come out again.

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12.

The captor has been busy during the night. When Ushuru wakes, the red sun is coming up over the mountains and there is almost nothing left of the bloody bower. The captor has dismantled it, burying bones and wreckage in the soft earth and muttering bitterly as he does so. At one point, bafflingly, he even jumps up and down. Ushuru watches him for a moment, then stands, stretches, and goes across to speak to the man. He explains his plans, although he knows that the man cannot understand him. The identities that they have created for themselves are over, Ushuru says, and it is time for both of them to learn what new roles they may occupy, within the parameters of Dreamtime. The man does not look up, and so, with a strange pang of regret, Rhen Gher Ushuru turns and walks away, across the moors of Yhi. The Ancestors' Song drifts back across the morning air; words from an old and other world. ○

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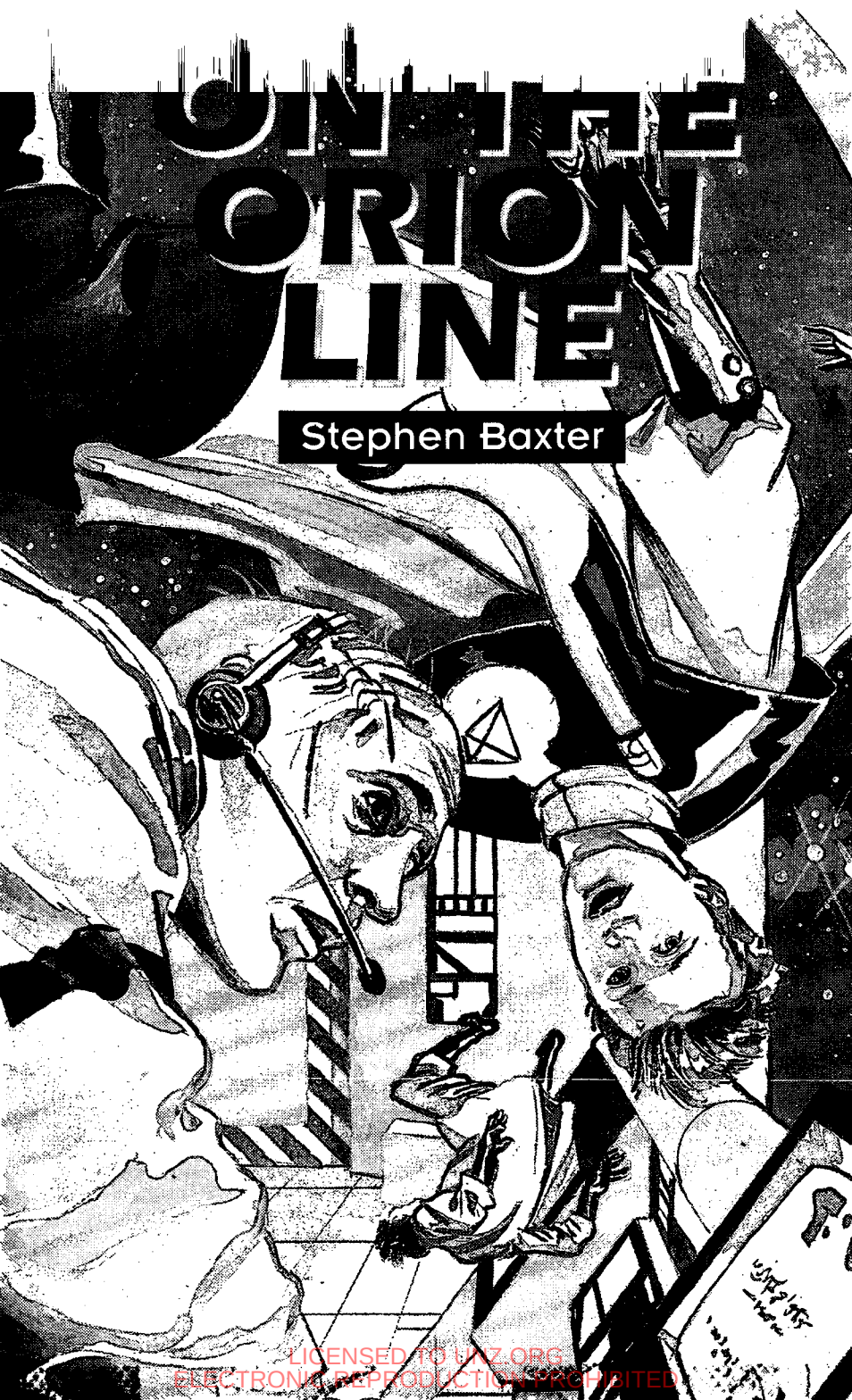
ORION LINE

Stephen Baxter



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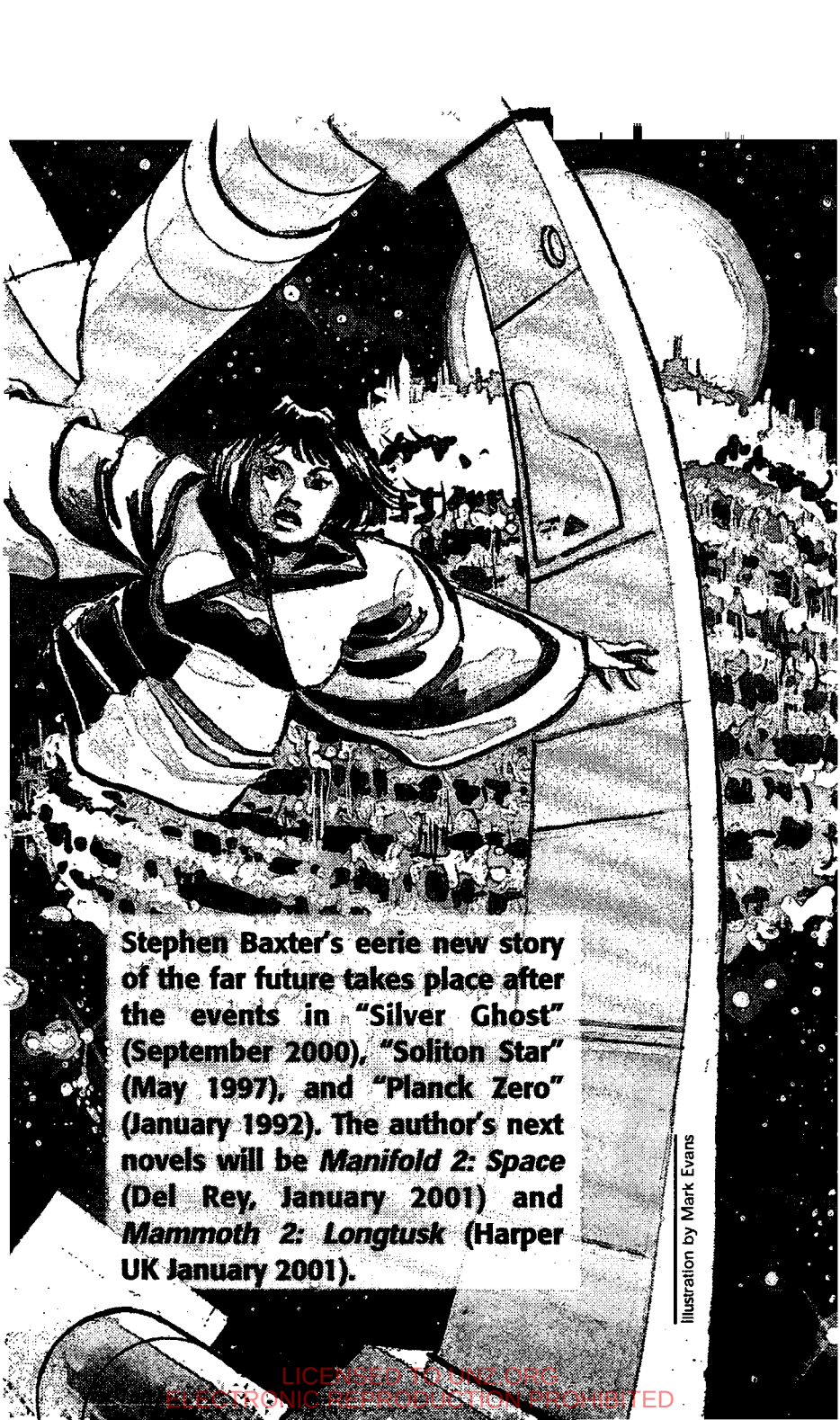

Stephen Baxter's eerie new story of the far future takes place after the events in "Silver Ghost" (September 2000), "Soliton Star" (May 1997), and "Planck Zero" (January 1992). The author's next novels will be *Manifold 2: Space* (Del Rey, January 2001) and *Mammoth 2: Longtusk* (Harper UK January 2001).

Illustration by Mark Evans

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The *Brief Life Burns Brightly* broke out of the fleet. We were chasing down a Ghost cruiser, and we were closing.

The lifedome of the *Brightly* was transparent, so it was as if Captain Teid in her big chair, and her officers and their equipment clusters—and a few low-grade tars like me—were just floating in space. The light was subtle, coming from a nearby cluster of hot young stars, and from the rivers of sparking lights that made up the fleet formation we had just left, and beyond *that* from the sparking of novae. This was the Orion Line—six thousand light years from Earth and a thousand lights long, a front that spread right along the inner edge of the Orion Spiral Arm—and the stellar explosions marked battles that must have concluded years ago.

And, not a handful of klicks away, the Ghost cruiser slid across space, running for home. The cruiser was a rough egg-shape of silvered rope. Hundreds of Ghosts clung to the rope. You could see them slithering this way and that, not affected at all by the emptiness around them.

The Ghosts' destination was a small, old yellow star. Pael, our tame Academician, had identified it as a fortress star from some kind of strangeness in its light. But up close you don't need to be an Academician to spot a fortress. From the *Brightly* I could see with my unaided eyes that the star had a pale blue cage around it—an open lattice with struts half a million kilometers long—thrown there by the Ghosts, for their own purposes.

I had a lot of time to watch all this. I was just a tar. I was fifteen years old.

My duties at that moment were non-specific. I was supposed to stand to, and render assistance any way that was required—most likely with basic medical attention should we go into combat. Right now the only one of us tars actually working was Halle, who was chasing down a pool of vomit sicked up by Pael, the Academician, the only non-Navy personnel on the bridge.

The action on the *Brightly* wasn't like you see in Virtual shows. The atmosphere was calm, quiet, competent. All you could hear was the murmur of voices, from the crew and the equipment, and the hiss of recycling air. No drama: it was like an operating theater.

There was a soft warning chime.

The captain raised an arm and called over Academician Pael, First Officer Till, and Jeru, the commissary assigned to the ship. They huddled close, conferring—apparently arguing. I saw the way flickering nova light reflected from Jeru's shaven head.

I felt my heart beat harder.

Everybody knew what the chime meant: that we were approaching the fortress cordon. Either we would break off, or we would chase the Ghost cruiser inside its invisible fortress. And everybody knew that no Navy ship that had ever penetrated a fortress cordon, ten light-minutes from the central star, had come back out again.

One way or the other, it would all be resolved soon.

Captain Teid cut short the debate. She leaned forward and addressed the crew. Her voice, cast through the ship, was friendly, like a cadre leader whispering in your ear. "You can all see we can't catch that swarm of Ghosts this side of the cordon. And you all know the hazard of crossing a cordon. But if we're ever going to break this blockade of theirs we have to find a way to bust open those forts. So we're going in anyhow. Stand by your stations."

There was a half-hearted cheer.

I caught Halle's eye. She grinned at me. She pointed at the captain, closed her fist and made a pumping movement. I admired her sentiment but she

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wasn't being too accurate, anatomically speaking, so I raised my middle finger and jiggled it back and forth.

It took a slap on the back of the head from Jeru, the commissary, to put a stop to that. "Little morons," she growled.

"Sorry, sir—"

I got another slap for the apology. Jeru was a tall, stocky woman, dressed in the bland monastic robes said to date from the time of the founding of the Commission for Historical Truth a thousand years ago. But rumor was she'd seen plenty of combat action of her own before joining the Commission, and such was her physical strength and speed of reflex I could well believe it.

As we neared the cordon the Academician, Pael, started a gloomy countdown. The slow geometry of Ghost cruiser and tinsel-wrapped fortress star swiveled across the crowded sky.

Everybody went quiet.

The darkest time is always just before the action starts. Even if you can see or hear what is going on, all you do is think. What was going to happen to us when we crossed that intangible border? Would a fleet of Ghost ships materialize all around us? Would some mysterious weapon simply blast us out of the sky?

I caught the eye of First Officer Till. He was a veteran of twenty years; his scalp had been burned away in some ancient close-run combat, long before I was born, and he wore a crown of scar tissue with pride.

"Let's do it, tar," he growled.

All the fear went away. I was overwhelmed by a feeling of togetherness, of us all being in this crap together. I had no thought of dying. Just: let's get through this.

"Yes, *sir!*"

Pael finished his countdown.

All the lights went out. Detonating stars wheeled.

And the ship exploded.

I was thrown into darkness. Air howled. Emergency bulkheads scythed past me, and I could hear people scream.

I slammed into the curving hull, nose pressed against the stars.

I bounced off and drifted. The inertial suspension was out, then. I thought I could smell blood—probably my own.

I could see the Ghost ship, a tangle of rope and silver baubles, tingling with highlights from the fortress star. We were still closing.

But I could also see shards of shattered lifedome, a sputtering drive unit. The shards were bits of the *Brightly.* It had gone, all gone, in a fraction of a second.

"Let's do it," I murmured.

Maybe I was out of it for a while.

Somebody grabbed my ankle and tugged me down. There was a competent slap on my cheek, enough to make me focus.

"Case. Can you hear me?"

It was First Officer Till. Even in the swimming starlight that burned-off scalp was unmistakable.

I glanced around. There were four of us here: Till, Commissary Jeru, Academician Pael, me. We were huddled up against what looked like the stump

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of the First Officer's console. I realized that the gale of venting air had stopped. I was back inside a hull with integrity, then—

"Case!"

"I—yes, sir."

"Report."

I touched my lip; my hand came away bloody. At a time like that it's your duty to report your injuries, honestly and fully. Nobody needs a hero who turns out not to be able to function. "I think I'm all right. I may have a concussion."

"Good enough. Strap down." Till handed me a length of rope.

I saw that the others had tied themselves to struts. I did the same.

Till, with practiced ease, swam away into the air, I guessed looking for other survivors.

Academician Pael was trying to curl into a ball. He couldn't even speak. The tears just rolled out of his eyes. I stared at the way big globules welled up and drifted away into the air, glimmering.

The action had been over in seconds. All a bit sudden for an earthworm, I guess.

Nearby, I saw, trapped under one of the emergency bulkheads, there was a pair of legs—just that. The rest of the body must have been chopped away, gone drifting off with the rest of the debris from *Brightly*. But I recognized those legs, from a garish pink stripe on the sole of the right boot. That had been Halle. She was the only girl I had ever screwed, I thought—and more than likely, given the situation, the only girl I ever would get to screw.

I couldn't figure out how I felt about that.

Jeru was watching me. "Tar—do you think we should all be frightened for ourselves, like the Academician?" Her accent was strong, unidentifiable.

"No, sir."

"No." Jeru studied Pael with contempt. "We are in a yacht, Academician. Something has happened to the *Brightly*. The 'dome was designed to break up into yachts like this." She sniffed. "We have air, and it isn't foul yet." She winked at me. "Maybe we can do a little damage to the Ghosts before we die, tar. What do you think?"

I grinned. "Yes, sir."

Pael lifted his head and stared at me with salt water eyes. "Lethe. You people are monsters." His accent was gentle, a lilt. "Even such a child as this. You embrace death—"

Jeru grabbed Pael's jaw in a massive hand, and pinched the joint until he squealed. "Captain Teid grabbed you, Academician; she threw you here, into the yacht, before the bulkhead came down. I saw it. If she hadn't taken the time to do that, she would have made it herself. Was *she* a monster? Did *she* embrace death?" And she pushed Pael's face away.

For some reason I hadn't thought about the rest of the crew until that moment. I guess I have a limited imagination. Now, I felt adrift. The captain—dead?

I said, "Excuse me, Commissary. How many other yachts got out?"

"None," she said steadily, making sure I had no illusions. "Just this one. They died doing their duty, tar. Like the captain."

Of course she was right, and I felt a little better. Whatever his character, Pael was too valuable not to save. As for me, I had survived through sheer blind chance, through being in the right place when the walls came down: if the captain had been close, her duty would have been to pull me out of the

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way and take my place. It isn't a question of human values but of economics: a *lot* more is invested in the training and experience of a Captain Teid—or a Pael—than in *me*.

But Pael seemed more confused than I was.

First Officer Till came bustling back with a heap of equipment. "Put these on." He handed out pressure suits. They were what we called slime suits in training: lightweight skinsuits, running off a backpack of gen-enged algae. "Move it," said Till. "Impact with the Ghost cruiser in four minutes. We don't have any power; there's nothing we can do but ride it out."

I crammed my legs into my suit.

Jeru complied, stripping off her robe to reveal a hard, scarred body. But she was frowning. "Why not heavier armor?"

For answer, Till picked out a gravity-wave handgun from the gear he had retrieved. Without pausing he held it to Pael's head and pushed the fire button.

Pael twitched.

Till said, "See? Nothing is working. Nothing but bio systems, it seems." He threw the gun aside.

Pael closed his eyes, breathing hard.

Till said to me, "Test your comms."

I closed up my hood and faceplate and began intoning, "One, two, three . . ." I could hear nothing.

Till began tapping at our backpacks, resetting the systems. His hood started to glow with transient, pale blue symbols. And then, scratchily, his voice started to come through. ". . . Five, six, seven—can you hear me, tar?"

"Yes, sir."

The symbols were bioluminescent. There were receptors on all our suits—photoreceptors, simple eyes—which could "read" the messages scrawled on our companions' suits. It was a backup system meant for use in environments where anything higher-tech would be a liability. But obviously it would only work as long as we were in line of sight.

"That will make life harder," Jeru said. Oddly, mediated by software, she was easier to understand.

Till shrugged. "You take it as it comes." Briskly, he began to hand out more gear. "These are basic field belt kits. There's some medical stuff: a suture kit, scalpel blades, blood-giving sets. You wear these syrettes around your neck, Academician. They contain painkillers, various gen-enged medviruses . . . no, you wear it *outside* your suit, Pael, so you can reach it. You'll find valve inlets here, on your sleeve, and here, on the leg." Now came weapons. "We should carry handguns, just in case they start working, but be ready with these." He handed out combat knives.

Pael shrank back.

"Take the knife, Academician. You can shave off that ugly beard, if nothing else."

I laughed out loud, and was rewarded with a wink from Till.

I took a knife. It was a heavy chunk of steel, solid and reassuring. I tucked it in my belt. I was starting to feel a whole lot better.

"Two minutes to impact," Jeru said. I didn't have a working chronometer; she must have been counting the seconds.

"Seal up." Till began to check the integrity of Pael's suit; Jeru and I helped each other. Face seal, glove seal, boot seal, pressure check. Water check, oh-two flow, cee-oh-two scrub . . .

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When we were sealed I risked poking my head above Till's chair.

The Ghost ship filled space. The craft was kilometers across, big enough to have dwarfed the poor, doomed *Brief Life Burns Brightly*. It was a tangle of silvery rope of depthless complexity, occluding the stars and the warring fleets. Bulky equipment pods were suspended in the tangle.

And everywhere there were Silver Ghosts, sliding like beads of mercury. I could see how the yacht's emergency lights were returning crimson highlights from the featureless hides of Ghosts, so they looked like sprays of blood droplets across that shining perfection.

"Ten seconds," Till called. "Brace."

Suddenly silver ropes thick as tree trunks were all around us, looming out of the sky.

And we were thrown into chaos again.

I heard a grind of twisted metal, a scream of air. The hull popped open like an eggshell. The last of our air fled in a gush of ice crystals, and the only sound I could hear was my own breathing.

The crumpling hull soaked up some of our momentum.

But then the base of the yacht hit, and it hit hard.

The chair was wrenched out of my grasp, and I was hurled upward. There was a sudden pain in my left arm. I couldn't help but cry out.

I reached the limit of my tether and rebounded. The jolt sent further waves of pain through my arm. From up there, I could see the others were clustered around the base of the First Officer's chair, which had collapsed.

I looked up. We had stuck like a dart in the outer layers of the Ghost ship. There were shining threads arcing all around us, as if a huge net had scooped us up.

Jeru grabbed me and pulled me down. She jarred my bad arm, and I winced. But she ignored me, and went back to working on Till. He was under the fallen chair.

Pael started to take a syrette of dope from the sachet around his neck.

Jeru knocked his hand away. "You always use the casualty's," she hissed. "Never your own."

Pael looked hurt, rebuffed. "Why?"

I could answer that. "Because the chances are you'll need your own in a minute."

Jeru stabbed a syrette into Till's arm.

Pael was staring at me through his faceplate with wide, frightened eyes. "You've broken your arm."

Looking closely at the arm for the first time, I saw that it was bent back at an impossible angle. I couldn't believe it, even through the pain. I'd never bust so much as a finger, all the way through training.

Now Till jerked, a kind of miniature convulsion, and a big bubble of spit and blood blew out of his lips. Then the bubble popped, and his limbs went loose.

Jeru sat back, breathing hard. She said, "Okay. Okay. How did he put it?—You take it as it comes." She looked around, at me, Pael. I could see she was trembling, which scared me. She said, "Now we move. We have to find an LUP. A lying-up point, Academician. A place to hole up."

I said, "The First Officer—"

"Is dead." She glanced at Pael. "Now it's just the three of us. We won't be able to avoid each other any more, Pael."

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Pael stared back, eyes empty.

Jeru looked at me, and for a second her expression softened. "A broken neck. Till broke his neck, tar."

Another death, just like that: just for a heartbeat that was too much for me.

Jeru said briskly, "Do your duty, tar. Help the worm."

I snapped back. "Yes, sir." I grabbed Pael's unresisting arm.

Led by Jeru, we began to move, the three of us, away from the crumpled wreck of our yacht, deep into the alien tangle of a Silver Ghost cruiser.

We found our LUP.

It was just a hollow in a somewhat denser tangle of silvery ropes, but it afforded us some cover, and it seemed to be away from the main concentration of Ghosts. We were still open to the vacuum—as the whole cruiser seemed to be—and I realized then that I wouldn't be getting out of this suit for a while.

As soon as we picked the LUP, Jeru made us take up positions in an all-round defense, covering a 360-degree arc.

Then we did nothing, absolutely nothing, for ten minutes.

It was SOP, standard operating procedure, and I was impressed. You've just come out of all the chaos of the destruction of the *Brightly* and the crash of the yacht, a frenzy of activity. Now you have to give your body a chance to adjust to the new environment, to the sounds and smells and sights.

Only here, there was nothing to smell but my own sweat and piss, nothing to hear but my ragged breathing. And my arm was hurting like hell.

To occupy my mind I concentrated on getting my night vision working. Your eyes take a while to adjust to the darkness—forty-five minutes before they are fully effective—but you are already seeing better after five. I could see stars through the chinks in the wiry metallic brush around me, the flares of distant novae, and the reassuring lights of our fleet. But a Ghost ship is a dark place, a mess of shadows and smeared-out reflections. It was going to be easy to get spooked here.

When the ten minutes were done, Academician Pael started bleating, but Jeru ignored him and came straight over to me. She got hold of my busted arm and started to feel the bone. "So," she said briskly. "What's your name, tar?"

"Case, sir."

"What do you think of your new quarters?"

"Where do I eat?"

She grinned. "Turn off your comms," she said.

I complied.

Without warning she pulled my arm, hard. I was glad she couldn't hear how I howled.

She pulled a canister out of her belt and squirted gunk over my arm; it was semi-sentient and snuggled into place, setting as a hard cast around my injury. When I was healed the cast would fall away of its own accord.

She motioned me to turn on my comms again, and held up a syrette.

"I don't need that."

"Don't be brave, tar. It will help your bones knit."

"Sir, there's a rumor that stuff makes you impotent." I felt stupid even as I said it.

Jeru laughed out loud, and just grabbed my arm. "Anyhow it's the First Officer's, and he doesn't need it any more, does he?"

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I couldn't argue with that; I accepted the injection. The pain started ebbing almost immediately.

Jeru pulled a tactical beacon out of her belt kit. It was a thumb-sized orange cylinder. "I'm going to try to signal the fleet. I'll work my way out of this tangle; even if the beacon is working we might be shielded in here." Pael started to protest, but she shut him up. I sensed I had been thrown into the middle of an ongoing conflict between them. "Case, you're on stag. And show this worm what's in his kit. I'll come back the same way I go. All right?"

"Yes." More SOP.

She slid away through silvery threads.

I lodged myself in the tangle and started to go through the stuff in the belt kits Till had fetched for us. There was water, rehydration salts, and compressed food, all to be delivered to spigots inside our sealed hoods. We had power packs the size of my thumbnail, but they were as dead as the rest of the kit. There was a lot of low-tech gear meant to prolong survival in a variety of situations, such as a magnetic compass, a heliograph, a thumb saw, a magnifying glass, pitons, and spindles of rope, even fishing line.

I had to show Pael how his suit functioned as a lavatory. The trick is just to let go; a slime suit recycles most of what you give it, and compresses the rest. That's not to say it's comfortable. I've never yet worn a suit that was good at absorbing odors. I bet no suit designer spent more than an hour in one of her own creations.

I felt fine.

The wreck, the hammer-blow deaths one after the other—none of it was far beneath the surface of my mind. But that's where it stayed, for now; as long as I had the next task to focus on, and the next after that, I could keep moving forward. The time to let it all hit you is after the show.

I guess Pael had never been trained like that.

He was a thin, spindly man, his eyes sunk in black shadow, and his ridiculous red beard was crammed up inside his faceplate. Now that the great crises were over, his energy seemed to have drained away, and his functioning was slowing to a crawl. He looked almost comical as he pawed at his useless bits of kit.

After a time he said, "Case, is it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you from Earth, child?"

"No. I—"

He ignored me. "The Academies are based on Earth. Did you know that, child? But they do admit a few off-worlders."

I glimpsed a lifetime of outsider resentment. But I could care less. Also I wasn't a child. I asked cautiously, "Where are you from, sir?"

He sighed. "It's 51 Pegasi. I-B."

I'd never heard of it. "What kind of place is that? Is it near Earth?"

"Is everything measured relative to Earth. . . ? Not very far. My home world was one of the first extra-solar planets to be discovered—or at least, the primary is. I grew up on a moon. The primary is a hot Jupiter."

I knew what *that* meant: a giant planet huddled close to its parent star.

He looked up at me. "Where you grew up, could you see the sky?"

"No—"

"I could. And the sky was full of sails. That close to the sun, solar sails work efficiently, you see. I used to watch them at night, schooners with sails

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hundreds of kilometers wide, tacking this way and that in the light. But you can't see the sky from Earth—not from the Academy bunkers anyhow."

"Then why did you go there?"

"I didn't have a choice." He laughed, hollowly. "I was doomed by being smart. That is why your precious commissary despises me so much, you see. I have been taught to think—and we can't have that, can we. . . ?"

I turned away from him and shut up. Jeru wasn't "my" commissary, and this sure wasn't my argument. Besides, Pael gave me the creeps. I've always been wary of people who knew too much about science and technology. With a weapon, all you want to know is how it works, what kind of energy or ammunition it needs, and what to do when it goes wrong. People who know all the technical background and the statistics are usually covering up their own failings; it is experience of use that counts.

But this was no loudmouth weapons tech. This was an Academician: one of humanity's elite scientists. I felt I had no point of contact with him at all.

I looked out through the tangle, trying to see the fleet's sliding, glimmering lanes of light.

There was motion in the tangle. I turned that way, motioning Pael to keep still and silent, and got hold of my knife in my good hand.

Jeru came bustling back, exactly the way she had left. She nodded approvingly at my alertness. "Not a peep out of the beacon."

Pael said, "You realize our time here is limited."

I asked, "The suits?"

"He means the star," Jeru said heavily. "Case, fortress stars seem to be unstable. When the Ghosts throw up their cordon, the stars don't last long before going pop."

Pael shrugged. "We have hours, a few days at most."

Jeru said, "Well, we're going to have to get out, beyond the fortress cordon, so we can signal the fleet. That or find a way to collapse the cordon altogether."

Pael laughed hollowly. "And how do you propose we do that?"

Jeru glared. "Isn't it your role to tell me, Academician?"

Pael leaned back and closed his eyes. "Not for the first time, you're being ridiculous."

Jeru growled. She turned to me. "You. What do *you* know about the Ghosts?"

I said, "They come from someplace cold. That's why they are wrapped up in silvery shells. You can't bring a Ghost down with laser fire because of those shells. They're perfectly reflective."

Pael said, "Not perfectly. They are based on a Planck-zero effect. . . . About one part in a billion of incident energy is absorbed."

I hesitated. "They say the Ghosts experiment on people."

Pael sneered. "Lies put about by your Commission for Historical Truth, Commissary. To demonize an opponent is a tactic as old as mankind."

Jeru wasn't perturbed. "Then why don't you put young Case right? How *do* the Ghosts go about their business?"

Pael said, "The Silver Ghosts tinker with the laws of physics."

I looked to Jeru; she shrugged.

Pael tried to explain. It was all to do with quagma.

Quagma is the state of matter that emerged from the Big Bang. Matter, when raised to sufficiently high temperatures, melts into a magma of quarks—a quagma. And at such temperatures the four fundamental forces

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of physics unify into a single superforce. When quagma is allowed to cool and expand its binding superforce decomposes into four sub-forces.

To my surprise, I understood some of this. The principle of the GUTdrive, which powers intrasystem ships like *Brief Life Burns Brightly*, is related.

Anyhow, by controlling the superforce decomposition, you can select the ratio between those forces. And those ratios govern the fundamental constants of physics.

Something like that.

Pael said, "That marvelous reflective coating of theirs is an example. Each Ghost is surrounded by a thin layer of space in which a fundamental number called the Planck constant is significantly lower than elsewhere. Thus, quantum effects are collapsed . . . because the energy carried by a photon, a particle of light, is proportional to the Planck constant, an incoming photon must shed most of its energy when it hits the shell—hence the reflectivity."

"All right," Jeru said. "So what are they doing here?"

Pael sighed. "The fortress star seems to be surrounded by an open shell of quagma and exotic matter. We surmise that the Ghosts have blown a bubble around each star, a space-time volume in which the laws of physics are—tweaked."

"And that's why our equipment failed."

"Presumably," said Pael, with cold sarcasm.

I asked, "What do the Ghosts want? Why do they do all this stuff?"

Pael studied me. "You are trained to kill them, and they don't even tell you that?"

Jeru just glowered.

Pael said, "The Ghosts were not shaped by competitive evolution. They are symbiotic creatures; they derive from life forms that huddled into cooperative collectives as their world turned cold. And they seem to be motivated—not by expansion and the acquisition of territory for its own sake, as we are—but by a desire to understand the fine-tuning of the universe. *Why are we here?* You see, young tar, there is only a narrow range of the constants of physics within which life of *any* sort is possible. We think the Ghosts are studying this question by pushing at the boundaries—by tinkering with the laws that sustain and contain us all."

Jeru said, "An enemy who can deploy the laws of physics as a weapon is formidable. But in the long run, we will out-compete the Ghosts."

Pael said bleakly, "Ah, the evolutionary destiny of mankind. How dismal. But we lived in peace with the Ghosts, under the Raoul Accords, for a thousand years. We are so different, with disparate motivations—why should there be a clash, any more than between two species of birds in the same garden?"

I'd never seen birds, or a garden, so that passed me by.

Jeru just glared. She said at last, "Let's return to practicalities. *How* do their fortresses work?" When Pael didn't reply, she snapped, "Academician, you've been *inside* a fortress cordon for an hour already and you haven't made a single fresh observation?"

Acidly, Pael demanded, "What would you have me do?"

Jeru nodded at me. "What have *you* seen, tar?"

"Our instruments and weapons don't work," I said promptly. "The *Brightly* exploded. I broke my arm."

Jeru said, "Till snapped his neck also." She flexed her hand within her glove. "What would make our bones more brittle? Anything else?"

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I shrugged.

Pael admitted, "I do feel somewhat warm."

Jeru asked, "Could these body changes be relevant?"

"I don't see how."

"Then figure it out."

"I have no equipment."

Jeru dumped spare gear—weapons, beacons—in his lap. "You have your eyes, your hands and your mind. Improvise." She turned to me. "As for you, tar, let's do a little infil. We still need to find a way off this scow."

I glanced doubtfully at Pael. "There's nobody to stand on stag."

Jeru said, "I know. But there are only three of us." She grasped Pael's shoulder, hard. "Keep your eyes open, Academician. We'll come back the same way we left. So you'll know it's us. Do you understand?"

Pael shrugged her away, focusing on the gadgets on his lap.

I looked at him doubtfully. It seemed to me a whole platoon of Ghosts could have come down on him without his even noticing. But Jeru was right; there was nothing more we could do.

She studied me, fingered my arm. "You up to this?"

"I'm fine, sir."

"You are lucky. A good war comes along once in a lifetime. And this is your war, tar."

That sounded like parade-ground pep talk, and I responded in kind. "Can I have your rations, sir? You won't be needing them soon." I mimed digging a grave.

She grinned back fiercely. "Yeah. When your turn comes, slit your suit and let the farts out before I take it off your stiffening corpse—"

Pael's voice was trembling. "You really are monsters."

I shared a glance with Jeru. But we shut up, for fear of upsetting the earthworm further.

I grasped my fighting knife, and we slid away into the dark.

What we were hoping to find was some equivalent of a bridge. Even if we succeeded, I couldn't imagine what we'd do next. Anyhow, we had to try.

We slid through the tangle. Ghost cable stuff is tough, even to a knife blade. But it is reasonably flexible; you can just push it aside if you get stuck, although we tried to avoid doing that for fear of leaving a sign.

We used standard patrolling SOP, adapted for the circumstance. We would move for ten or fifteen minutes, clambering through the tangle, and then take a break for five minutes. I'd sip water—I was getting hot—and maybe nibble on a glucose tab, check on my arm, and pull the suit around me to get comfortable again. It's the way to do it. If you just push yourself on and on you run down your reserves and end up in no fit state to achieve the goal anyhow.

And all the while I was trying to keep up my all-around awareness, protecting my dark adaptation, and making appreciations. How far away is Jeru? What if an attack comes from in front, behind, above, below, left or right? Where can I find cover?

I began to build up an impression of the Ghost cruiser. It was a rough egg-shape, a couple of kilometers long, and basically a mass of the anonymous silvery cable. There were chambers and platforms and instruments stuck as if at random into the tangle, like food fragments in an old man's beard. I guess it makes for a flexible, easily modified configuration. Where the tan-

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gle was a little less thick, I glimpsed a more substantial core, a cylinder running along the axis of the craft. Perhaps it was the drive unit. I wondered if it was functioning; perhaps the Ghost equipment was designed to adapt to the changed conditions inside the fortress cordon.

There were Ghosts all over the craft.

They drifted over and through the tangle, following pathways invisible to us. Or they would cluster in little knots on the tangle. We couldn't tell what they were doing or saying. To human eyes a Silver Ghost is just a silvery sphere, visible only by reflection like a hole cut out of space, and without specialist equipment it is impossible even to tell one from another.

We kept out of sight. But I was sure the Ghosts must have spotted us, or were at least tracking our movements. After all we'd crash-landed in their ship. But they made no overt moves toward us.

We reached the outer hull, the place the cabling ran out, and dug back into the tangle a little way to stay out of sight.

I got an unimpeded view of the stars.

Still those nova firecrackers went off all over the sky; still those young stars glared like lanterns. It seemed to me the fortress's central, enclosed star looked a little brighter, hotter than it had been. I made a mental note to report that to the Academician.

But the most striking sight was the fleet.

Over a volume light-months wide, countless craft slid silently across the sky. They were organized in a complex network of corridors filling three-dimensional space: rivers of light gushed this way and that, their different colors denoting different classes and sizes of vessel. And, here and there, denser knots of color and light sparked, irregular flares in the orderly flows. They were places where human ships were engaging the enemy, places where people were fighting and dying.

It was a magnificent sight. But it was a big, empty sky, and the nearest sun was that eerie dwarf enclosed in its spooky blue net, a long way away, and there was movement in three dimensions, above me, below me, all around me. . . .

I found the fingers of my good hand had locked themselves around a sliver of the tangle.

Jeru grabbed my wrist and shook my arm until I was able to let go. She kept hold of my arm, her eyes locked on mine. *I have you. You won't fall.* Then she pulled me into a dense knot of the tangle, shutting out the sky.

She huddled close to me, so the bio lights of our suits wouldn't show far. Her eyes were pale blue, like windows. "You aren't used to being outside, are you, tar?"

"I'm sorry, Commissary. I've been trained—"

"You're still human. We all have weak points. The trick is to know them and allow for them. Where are you from?"

I managed a grin. "Mercury. Caloris Planitia." Mercury is a ball of iron at the bottom of the sun's gravity well. It is an iron mine, and an exotic matter factory, with a sun like a lid hanging over it. Most of the surface is given over to solar power collectors. It is a place of tunnels and warrens, where kids compete with the rats.

"And that's why you joined up? To get away?"

"I was drafted."

"Come on," she scoffed. "On a place like Mercury there are ways to hide. Are you a romantic, tar? You wanted to see the stars?"

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"No," I said bluntly. "Life is more useful here."

She studied me. "A brief life should burn brightly—eh, tar?"

"Yes, sir."

"I came from Deneb," she said. "Do you know it?"

"No."

"Sixteen hundred light years from Earth—a system settled some four centuries after the start of the Third Expansion. It is quite different from the solar system. It is—organized. By the time the first ships reached Deneb, the mechanics of exploitation had become efficient. From preliminary exploration to working shipyards and daughter colonies in less than a century. . . . Deneb's resources—its planets and asteroids and comets, even the star itself—have been mined to fund fresh colonizing waves, the greater Expansion—and, of course, to support the war with the Ghosts."

She swept her hand over the sky. "Think of it, tar. The Third Expansion: between here and Sol, across six thousand light years—nothing but mankind, the fruit of a thousand years of world-building. And all of it linked by economics. Older systems like Deneb, their resources spent—even the solar system itself—are supported by a flow of goods and materials inward from the growing periphery of the Expansion. There are trade lanes spanning thousands of light years, lanes that never leave human territory, plied by vast schooners kilometers wide. But now the Ghosts are in our way. And *that's* what we're fighting for!"

"Yes, sir."

She eyed me. "You ready to go on?"

"Yes."

We began to make our way forward again, just under the tangle, still following patrol SOP.

I was glad to be moving again. I've never been comfortable talking personally—and for sure not with a Commissary. But I suppose even Commissaries need to talk.

Jeru spotted a file of the Ghosts moving in a crocodile, like so many schoolchildren, toward the head of the ship. It was the most purposeful activity we'd seen so far, so we followed them.

After a couple of hundred meters the Ghosts began to duck down into the tangle, out of our sight. We followed them in.

Maybe fifty meters deep, we came to a large enclosed chamber, a smooth bean-shaped pod that would have been big enough to enclose our yacht. The surface appeared to be semi-transparent, perhaps designed to let in sunlight. I could see shadowy shapes moving within.

Ghosts were clustered around the pod's hull, brushing its surface.

Jeru beckoned, and we worked our way through the tangle toward the far end of the pod, where the density of the Ghosts seemed to be lowest.

We slithered to the surface of the pod. There were sucker pads on our palms and toes to help us grip. We began crawling along the length of the pod, ducking flat when we saw Ghosts loom into view. It was like climbing over a glass ceiling.

The pod was pressurized. At one end of the pod a big ball of mud hung in the air, brown and viscous. It seemed to be heated from within; it was slowly boiling, with big sticky bubbles of vapor crowding its surface, and I saw how it was laced with purple and red smears. There is no convection in zero gravity, of course. Maybe the Ghosts were using pumps to drive the flow of vapor.

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Tubes led off from the mud ball to the hull of the pod. Ghosts clustered there, sucking up the purple gunk from the mud.

We figured it out in bioluminescent "whispers." The Ghosts were *feeding*. Their home world is too small to have retained much internal warmth, but, deep beneath their frozen oceans or in the dark of their rocks, a little primordial geotherm heat must leak out still, driving fountains of minerals dragged up from the depths. And, as at the bottom of Earth's oceans, on those minerals and the slow leak of heat, life forms feed. And the Ghosts feed on *them*.

So this mud ball was a field kitchen. I peered down at purplish slime, a gourmet meal for Ghosts, and I didn't envy them.

There was nothing for us here. Jeru beckoned me again, and we slithered further forward.

The next section of the pod was . . . strange.

It was a chamber full of sparkling, silvery saucer-shapes, like smaller, flattened-out Ghosts, perhaps. They fizzed through the air or crawled over each other or jammed themselves together into great wadded balls that would hold for a few seconds and then collapse, their component parts squirming off for some new adventure elsewhere. I could see there were feeding tubes on the walls, and one or two Ghosts drifted among the saucer things, like an adult in a yard of squabbling children.

There was a subtle shadow before me.

I looked up, and found myself staring at my own reflection—an angled head, an open mouth, a sprawled body—folded over, fish-eye style, just centimeters from my nose.

It was a Ghost. It bobbed massively before me.

I pushed myself away from the hull, slowly. I grabbed hold of the nearest tangle branch with my good hand. I knew I couldn't reach for my knife, which was tucked into my belt at my back. And I couldn't see Jeru anywhere. It might be that the Ghosts had taken her already. Either way I couldn't call her, or even look for her, for fear of giving her away.

The Ghost had a heavy-looking belt wrapped around its equator. I had to assume that those complex knots of equipment were weapons. Aside from its belt, the Ghost was quite featureless: it might have been stationary, or spinning at a hundred revolutions a minute. I stared at its hide, trying to understand that there was a layer in there like a separate universe, where the laws of physics had been tweaked. But all I could see was my own scared face looking back at me.

And then Jeru fell on the Ghost from above, limbs splayed, knives glinting in both hands. I could see she was yelling—mouth open, eyes wide—but she fell in utter silence, her comms disabled.

Flexing her body like a whip, she rammed both knives into the Ghost's hide—if I took that belt to be its equator, somewhere near its north pole. The Ghost pulsated, complex ripples chasing across its surface. But Jeru did a handstand and reached up with her legs to the tangle above, and anchored herself there.

The Ghost began to spin, trying to throw Jeru off. But she held her grip on the tangle, and kept the knives thrust in its hide, and all the Ghost succeeded in doing was opening up twin gashes, right across its upper section. Steam pulsed out, and I glimpsed redness within.

For long seconds I just hung there, frozen.

You're trained to mount the proper reaction to an enemy assault. But it

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all vaporizes when you're faced with a ton of spinning, pulsing monster, and you're armed with nothing but a knife. You just want to make yourself as small as possible; maybe it will all go away. But in the end you know it won't, that something has to be done.

So I pulled out my own knife and launched myself at that north pole area.

I started to make cross-cuts between Jeru's gashes. Ghost skin is tough, like thick rubber, but easy to cut if you have the anchorage. Soon I had loosened flaps and lids of skin, and I started pulling them away, exposing a deep redness within. Steam gushed out, sparkling to ice.

Jeru let go of her perch and joined me. We clung with our fingers and hands to the gashes we'd made, and we cut and slashed and dug; though the Ghost spun crazily, it couldn't shake us loose. Soon we were hauling out great warm mounds of meat—ropes like entrails, pulsing slabs like a human's liver or heart. At first ice crystals spurted all around us, but as the Ghost lost the heat it had hoarded all its life, that thin wind died, and frost began to gather on the cut and torn flesh.

At last Jeru pushed my shoulder, and we both drifted away from the Ghost. It was still spinning, but I could see that the spin was nothing but dead momentum; the Ghost had lost its heat, and its life.

Jeru and I faced each other.

I said breathlessly, "I never heard of anyone in hand-to-hand with a Ghost before."

"Neither did I. Lethe," she said, inspecting her hand. "I think I cracked a finger."

It wasn't funny. But Jeru stared at me, and I stared back, and then we both started to laugh, and our slime suits pulsed with pink and blue icons.

"He stood his ground," I said.

"Yes. Maybe he thought we were threatening the nursery."

"The place with the silver saucers?"

She looked at me quizzically. "Ghosts are symbiotes, tar. That looked to me like a nursery for Ghost hides. Independent entities."

I had never thought of Ghosts having young. I had not thought of the Ghost we had killed as a mother protecting its young. I'm not a deep thinker now, and wasn't then; but it was not, for me, a comfortable thought.

But then Jeru started to move. "Come on, tar. Back to work." She anchored her legs in the tangle and began to grab at the still-rotating Ghost carcass, trying to slow its spin.

I anchored likewise and began to help her. The Ghost was massive, the size of a major piece of machinery, and it had built up respectable momentum; at first I couldn't grab hold of the skin flaps that spun past my hand. As we labored I became aware I was getting uncomfortably hot. The light that seeped into the tangle from that caged sun seemed to be getting stronger by the minute.

But as we worked those uneasy thoughts soon dissipated.

At last we got the Ghost under control. Briskly Jeru stripped it of its kit belt, and we began to cram the baggy corpse as deep as we could into the surrounding tangle. It was a grisly job. As the Ghost crumpled further, more of its innards, stiffening now, came pushing out of the holes we'd given it in its hide, and I had to keep from gagging as the foul stuff came pushing out into my face.

At last it was done—as best we could manage it, anyhow.

Jeru's faceplate was smeared with black and red. She was sweating hard,

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her face pink. But she was grinning, and she had a trophy, the Ghost belt around her shoulders. We began to make our way back, following the same SOP as before.

When we got back to our lying-up point, we found Academician Pael was in trouble.

Pael had curled up in a ball, his hands over his face. We pulled him open. His eyes were closed, his face blotched pink, and his faceplate dripped with condensation.

He was surrounded by gadgets stuck in the tangle—including parts from what looked like a broken-open starbreaker handgun; I recognized prisms and mirrors and diffraction gratings. Well, unless he woke up, he wouldn't be able to tell us what he had been doing here.

Jeru glanced around. The light of the fortress's central star had gotten a *lot* stronger. Our lying-up point was now bathed in light—and heat—with the surrounding tangle offering very little shelter. "Any ideas, tar?"

I felt the exhilaration of our infil drain away. "No, sir."

Jeru's face, bathed in sweat, showed tension. I noticed she was favoring her left hand. She'd mentioned, back at the nursery pod, that she'd cracked a finger, but had said nothing about it since—nor did she give it any time now. "All right." She dumped the Ghost equipment belt and took a deep draught of water from her hood spigot. "Tar, you're on stag. Try to keep Pael in the shade of your body. And if he wakes up, *ask him what he's found out.*"

"Yes, sir."

"Good."

And then she was gone, melting into the complex shadows of the tangle as if she'd been born to these conditions.

I found a place where I could keep up 360-degree vision, and offer a little of my shadow to Pael—not that I imagined it helped much.

I had nothing to do but wait.

As the Ghost ship followed its own mysterious course, the light dapples that came filtering through the tangle shifted and evolved. Clinging to the tangle, I thought I could feel vibration: a slow, deep harmonization that pulsed through the ship's giant structure. I wondered if I was hearing the deep voices of Ghosts, calling to each other from one end of their mighty ship to another. It all served to remind me that everything in my environment, *everything*, was alien, and I was very far from home.

I tried to count my heartbeat, my breaths; I tried to figure out how long a second was. "A thousand and one. A thousand and two . . ." Keeping time is a basic human trait; time provides a basic orientation, and keeps you mentally sharp and in touch with reality. But I kept losing count.

And all my efforts failed to stop darker thoughts creeping into my head.

During a drama like the contact with the Ghost, you don't realize what's happening to you because your body blanks it out; on some level you know you just don't have time to deal with it. Now I had stopped moving, the aches and pains of the last few hours started crowding in on me. I was still sore in my head and back and, of course, my busted arm. I could feel deep bruises, maybe cuts, on my gloved hands where I had hauled at my knife, and I felt as if I had wrenched my good shoulder. One of my toes was throbbing ominously: I wondered if I had cracked another bone, here in this weird environment in which my skeleton had become as brittle as an old man's. I

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was chafed at my groin and armpits and knees and ankles and elbows, my skin rubbed raw. I was used to suits; normally I'm tougher than that.

The shafts of sunlight on my back were working on me too; it felt as if I was lying underneath the elements of an oven. I had a headache, a deep sick feeling in the pit of my stomach, a ringing in my ears, and a persistent ring of blackness around my eyes. Maybe I was just exhausted, dehydrated; maybe it was more than that.

I started to think back over my operation with Jeru, and the regrets began.

Okay, I'd stood my ground when confronted by the Ghost and not betrayed Jeru's position. But when she launched her attack I'd hesitated, for those crucial few seconds. Maybe if I'd been tougher the commissary wouldn't find herself hauling through the tangle, alone, with a busted finger distracting her with pain signals.

Our training is comprehensive. You're taught to expect that kind of hindsight torture, in the quiet moments, and to discount it—or, better yet, learn from it. But, effectively alone in that metallic alien forest, I wasn't finding my training was offering much perspective.

And, worse, I started to think ahead. Always a mistake.

I couldn't believe that the Academician and his reluctant gadgetry were going to achieve anything significant. And for all the excitement of our infil, we hadn't found anything resembling a bridge or any vulnerable point we could attack, and all we'd come back with was a belt of field kit we didn't even understand.

For the first time I began to consider seriously the possibility that I wasn't going to live through this—that I was going to die when my suit gave up or the sun went pop, whichever came first, in no more than a few hours.

A brief life burns brightly. That's what you're taught. Longevity makes you conservative, fearful, selfish. Humans made that mistake before, and we finished up a subject race. Live fast and furiously, for *you* aren't important—all that matters is what you can do for the species.

But I didn't want to die.

If I never returned to Mercury again I wouldn't shed a tear. But I had a life now, in the Navy. And then there were my buddies: the people I'd trained and served with, people like Halle—even Jeru. Having found fellowship for the first time in my life, I didn't want to lose it so quickly, and fall into the darkness alone—especially if it was to be for *nothing*.

But maybe I wasn't going to get a choice.

After an unmeasured time, Jeru returned. She was hauling a silvery blanket. It was Ghost hide. She started to shake it out.

I dropped down to help her. "You went back to the one we killed—"

"—and skinned him," she said, breathless. "I just scraped off the crap with a knife. The Planck-zero layer peels away easily. And look . . ." she made a quick incision in the glimmering sheet with her knife. Then she put the two edges together again, ran her finger along the seam, and showed me the result. I couldn't even see where the cut had been. "Self-sealing, self-healing," she said. "Remember that, tar."

"Yes, sir."

We started to rig the punctured, splayed-out hide as a rough canopy over our LUP, blocking as much of the sunlight as possible from Pael. A few slivers of frozen flesh still clung to the hide, but mostly it was like working with a fine, light metallic foil.

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In the sudden shade, Pael was starting to stir. His moans were translated to stark bioluminescent icons.

"Help him," Jeru snapped. "Make him drink." And while I did that she dug into the med kit on her belt and started to spray cast material around the fingers of her left hand.

"It's the speed of light," Pael said. He was huddled in a corner of our LUP, his legs tucked against his chest. His voice must have been feeble; the bioluminescent sigils on his suit were fragmentary and came with possible variants extrapolated by the translator software.

"Tell us," Jeru said, relatively gently.

"The Ghosts have found a way to *change* lightspeed in this fortress. In fact to increase it." He began talking again about quagma and physics constants and the rolled-up dimensions of spacetime, but Jeru waved that away irritably.

"How do you *know* this?"

Pael began tinkering with his prisms and gratings. "I took your advice, Commissary." He beckoned to me. "Come see, child."

I saw that a shaft of red light, split out and deflected by his prism, shone through a diffraction grating and cast an angular pattern of dots and lines on a scrap of smooth plastic behind.

"You see?" His eyes searched my face.

"I'm sorry, sir."

"The wavelength of the light has changed. It has been increased. Red light should have a wavelength, oh, a fifth shorter than that indicated by this pattern."

I was struggling to understand. I held up my hand. "Shouldn't the green of this glove turn yellow, or blue. . . ?"

Pael sighed. "No. Because the color you see depends, not on the wavelength of a photon, but on its energy. Conservation of energy still applies, even where the Ghosts are tinkering. So each photon carries as much energy as before—and evokes the same 'color.' Since a photon's energy is proportional to its frequency, that means frequencies are left unchanged. But since lightspeed is equal to frequency multiplied by wavelength, an increase in wavelength implies—"

"An increase in lightspeed," said Jeru.

"Yes."

I didn't follow much of that. I turned and looked up at the light that leaked around our Ghost-hide canopy. "So we see the same colors. The light of that star gets here a little faster. What difference does it make?"

Pael shook his head. "Child, a fundamental constant like lightspeed is embedded in the deep structure of our universe. Lightspeed is part of the ratio known as the fine structure constant." He started babbling about the charge on the electron, but Jeru cut him off.

She said, "Case, the fine structure constant is a measure of the strength of an electric or magnetic force."

I could follow that much. "And if you increase lightspeed—"

"You *reduce* the strength of the force." Pael raised himself. "Consider this. Human bodies are held together by molecular binding energy—electromagnetic forces. Here, electrons are more loosely bound to atoms; the atoms in a molecule are more loosely bound to each other." He rapped on the cast on my arm. "And so your bones are more brittle, your skin more easy to pierce

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or chafe. Do you see? You too are embedded in spacetime, my young friend. You too are affected by the Ghosts' tinkering. And because lightspeed in this infernal pocket continues to increase—as far as I can tell from these poor experiments—you are becoming more fragile every second."

It was a strange, eerie thought: that something so basic in my universe could be manipulated. I put my arms around my chest and shuddered.

"Other effects," Pael went on bleakly. "The density of matter is dropping. Perhaps our structure will eventually begin to crumble. And dissociation temperatures are reduced."

Jeru snapped, "What does that mean?"

"Melting and boiling points are reduced. No wonder we are overheating. It is intriguing that bio systems have proven rather more robust than electromechanical ones. But if we don't get out of here soon, our blood will start to boil. . . ."

"Enough," Jeru said. "What of the star?"

"A star is a mass of gas with a tendency to collapse under its own gravity. But heat, supplied by fusion reactions in the core, creates gas and radiation pressures that push outward, counteracting gravity."

"And if the fine structure constant changes—"

"Then the balance is lost. Commissary, as gravity begins to win its ancient battle, the fortress star has become more luminous—it is burning faster. That explains the observations we made from outside the cordon. But this cannot last."

"The novae," I said.

"Yes. The explosions, layers of the star blasted into space, are a symptom of destabilized stars seeking a new balance. The rate at which *our* star is approaching that catastrophic moment fits with the lightspeed drift I have observed." He smiled and closed his eyes. "A single cause predicating so many effects. It is all rather pleasing, in an aesthetic way."

Jeru said, "At least we know how the ship was destroyed. Every control system is mediated by finely tuned electromagnetic effects. Everything must have gone crazy at once. . . ."

We figured it out. The *Brief Life Burns Brightly* had been a classic GUT-ship, of a design that hasn't changed in its essentials for thousands of years. The lifedome, a tough translucent bubble, contained the crew of twenty. The 'dome was connected by a spine a klick long to a GUTdrive engine pod.

When we crossed the cordon boundary—when all the bridge lights failed—the control systems went down, and all the pod's superforce energy must have tried to escape at once. The spine of the ship had thrust itself up into the lifedome, like a nail rammed into a skull.

Pael said dreamily, "If lightspeed were a tad faster, throughout the universe, then hydrogen could not fuse to helium. There would only be hydrogen: no fusion to power stars, no chemistry. Conversely if lightspeed were a little lower, hydrogen would fuse too easily, and there would be *no* hydrogen, nothing to make stars—or water. You see how critical it all is? No doubt the Ghosts' science of fine-tuning is advancing considerably here on the Orion Line, even as it serves its trivial defensive purpose . . ."

Jeru glared at him, her contempt obvious. "We must take this piece of intelligence back to the Commission. If the Ghosts can survive and function in these fast-light bubbles of theirs, so can we. We may be at the pivot of history, gentlemen."

I knew she was right. The primary duty of the Commission for Historical

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Truth is to gather and deploy intelligence about the enemy. And so *my* primary duty, and Pael's, was now to help Jeru get this piece of data back to her organization.

But Pael was mocking her.

"Not for ourselves, but for the species. Is that the line, Commissary? You are so grandiose. And yet you blunder around in comical ignorance. Even your quixotic quest aboard this cruiser was futile. There probably is no bridge on this ship. The Ghosts' entire morphology, their evolutionary design, is based on the notion of cooperation, of symbiosis; why should a Ghost ship have a metaphoric *head*? And as for the trophy you have returned—" He held up the belt of Ghost artifacts. "There are no weapons here. These are sensors, tools. There is nothing here capable of producing a significant energy discharge. This is less threatening than a bow and arrow." He let go of the belt; it drifted away. "The Ghost wasn't trying to kill you. It was blocking you. Which is a classic Ghost tactic."

Jeru's face was stony. "It was in our way. That is sufficient reason for destroying it."

Pael shook his head. "Minds like yours will destroy *us*, Commissary."

Jeru stared at him with suspicion. Then she said, "*You have a way.* Don't you, Academician? A way to get us out of here."

He tried to face her down, but her will was stronger, and he averted his eyes.

Jeru said heavily, "Regardless of the fact that three lives are at stake—does duty mean nothing to you, Academician? You are an intelligent man. Can you not see that this is a war of human destiny?"

Pael laughed. "Destiny—or economics?"

I looked from one to the other, dismayed, baffled. I thought we should be doing less yapping and more fighting.

Pael said, watching me, "You see, child, as long as the explorers and the mining fleets and the colony ships are pushing outward, as long as the Third Expansion is growing, our economy works. The riches can continue to flow inward, into the mined-out systems, feeding a vast horde of humanity who have become more populous than the stars themselves. But as soon as that growth falters . . ."

Jeru was silent.

I understood some of this. The Third Expansion had reached all the way to the inner edge of our spiral arm of the galaxy. Now the first colony ships were attempting to make their way across the void to the next arm.

Our arm, the Orion Arm, is really just a shingle, a short arc. But the Sagittarius Arm is one of the galaxy's dominant features. For example, it contains a huge region of star-birth, one of the largest in the galaxy, immense clouds of gas and dust capable of producing millions of stars each. It was a prize indeed.

But that is where the Silver Ghosts live.

When it appeared that our inexorable expansion was threatening not just their own mysterious projects but their home system, the Ghosts began, for the first time, to resist us.

They had formed a blockade, called by human strategists the Orion Line: a thick sheet of fortress stars, right across the inner edge of the Orion Arm, places the Navy and the colony ships couldn't follow. It was a devastatingly effective ploy.

This was a war of colonization, of world-building. For a thousand years we

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had been spreading steadily from star to star, using the resources of one system to explore, terraform and populate the worlds of the next. With too deep a break in that chain of exploitation, the enterprise broke down.

And so the Ghosts had been able to hold up human expansion for fifty years.

Pael said, "We are already choking. There have already been wars, young Case: humans fighting human, as the inner systems starve. All the Ghosts have to do is wait for us to destroy ourselves, and free them to continue their own rather more worthy projects."

Jeru floated down before him. "Academician, listen to me. Growing up at Deneb, I saw the great schooners in the sky, bringing the interstellar riches that kept my people alive. I was intelligent enough to see the logic of history—that we must maintain the Expansion, *because there is no choice*. And that is why I joined the armed forces, and later the Commission for Historical Truth. For I understood the dreadful truth which the Commission cradles. And that is why we must labor every day to maintain the unity and purpose of mankind. For if we falter we die; as simple as that."

"Commissary, your creed of mankind's evolutionary destiny condemns our own kind to become a swarm of children, granted a few moments of loving and breeding and dying, before being cast into futile war." Pael glanced at me.

"But," Jeru said, "it is a creed that has bound us together for a thousand years. It is a creed that binds uncounted trillions of human beings across thousands of light years. It is a creed that binds a humanity so diverse it appears to be undergoing speciation. . . . Are you strong enough to defy such a creed now? Come, Academician. None of us *chooses* to be born in the middle of a war. We must all do our best for each other, for other human beings; what else is there?"

I touched Pael's shoulder; he flinched away. "Academician—is Jeru right? Is there a way we can live through this?"

Pael shuddered. Jeru hovered over him.

"Yes," Pael said at last. "Yes, there is a way."

The idea turned out to be simple.

And the plan Jeru and I devised to implement it was even simpler. It was based on a single assumption: Ghosts aren't aggressive. It was ugly, I'll admit that, and I could see why it would distress a squeamish earthworm like Pael. But sometimes there are no good choices.

Jeru and I took a few minutes to rest up, check over our suits and our various injuries, and to make ourselves comfortable. Then, following patrol SOP once more, we made our way back to the pod of immature hides.

We came out of the tangle and drifted down to that translucent hull. We tried to keep away from concentrations of Ghosts, but we made no real effort to conceal ourselves. There was little point, after all; the Ghosts would know all about us, and what we intended, soon enough.

We hammered pitons into the pliable hull, and fixed rope to anchor ourselves. Then we took our knives and started to saw our way through the hull.

As soon as we started, the Ghosts began to gather around us, like vast antibodies.

They just hovered there, eerie faceless baubles drifting as if in vacuum breezes. But as I stared up at a dozen distorted reflections of my own skin-

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ny face, I felt an unreasonable loathing rise up in me. Maybe you could think of them as a family banding together to protect their young. I didn't care; a lifetime's carefully designed hatred isn't thrown off so easily. I went at my work with a will.

Jeru got through the pod hull first.

The air gushed out in a fast-condensing fountain. The baby hides fluttered, their distress obvious. And the Ghosts began to cluster around Jeru, like huge light globes.

Jeru glanced at me. "Keep working, tar."

"Yes, sir."

In another couple of minutes I was through. The air pressure was already dropping. It dwindled to nothing when we cut a big door-sized flap in that roof. Anchoring ourselves with the ropes, we rolled that lid back, opening the roof wide. A few last wisps of vapor came curling around our heads, ice fragments sparkling.

The hide babies convulsed. Immature, they could not survive the sudden vacuum, intended as their ultimate environment. But the way they died made it easy for us.

The silvery hides came flapping up out of the hole in the roof, one by one. We just grabbed each one—like grabbing hold of a billowing sheet—and we speared it with a knife, and threaded it on a length of rope. All we had to do was sit there and wait for them to come. There were hundreds of them, and we were kept busy.

I hadn't expected the adult Ghosts to sit through that, non-aggressive or not; and I was proved right. Soon they were clustering all around me, vast silvery bellies looming. A Ghost is massive and solid, and it packs a lot of inertia; if one hits you in the back you know about it. Soon they were nudging me hard enough to knock me flat against the roof, over and over. Once I was wrenched so hard against my tethering rope it felt as if I had cracked another bone or two in my foot.

And, meanwhile, I was starting to feel a lot worse: dizzy, nauseous, overheated. It was getting harder to get back upright each time after being knocked down. I was growing weaker fast; I imagined the tiny molecules of my body falling apart in this Ghost-polluted space.

For the first time I began to believe we were going to fail.

But then, quite suddenly, the Ghosts backed off. When they were clear of me, I saw they were clustering around Jeru.

She was standing on the hull, her feet tangled up in rope, and she had knives in both hands. She was slashing crazily at the Ghosts, and at the baby hides that came flapping past her, making no attempt to capture them now, simply cutting and destroying whatever she could reach. I could see that one arm was hanging awkwardly—maybe it was dislocated, or even broken—but she kept on slicing regardless.

And the Ghosts were clustering around her, huge silver spheres crushing her frail, battling human form.

She was sacrificing herself to save me—just as Captain Teid, in the last moments of the *Brightly*, had given herself to save Pael. And *my* duty was to complete the job.

I stabbed and threaded, over and over, as the flimsy hides came tumbling out of that hole, slowly dying.

At last no more hides came.

I looked up, blinking to get the salt sweat out of my eyes. A few hides were

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still tumbling around the interior of the pod, but they were inert and out of my reach. Others had evaded us and gotten stuck in the tangle of the ship's structure, too far and too scattered to make them worth pursuing further. What I had got would have to suffice.

I started to make my way out of there, back through the tangle, to the location of our wrecked yacht, where I hoped Pael would be waiting.

I looked back once. I couldn't help it. The Ghosts were still clustered over the ripped pod roof. Somewhere in there, whatever was left of Jeru was still fighting.

I had an impulse, almost overpowering, to go back to her. No human being should die alone. But I knew I had to get out of there, to complete the mission, to make her sacrifice worthwhile.

So I got.

Pael and I finished the job at the outer hull of the Ghost cruiser.

Stripping the hides turned out to be as easy as Jeru had described. Fitting together the Planck-zero sheets was simple too—you just line them up and seal them with a thumb. I got on with that, sewing the hides together into a sail, while Pael worked on a rigging of lengths of rope, all fixed to a deck panel from the wreck of the yacht. He was fast and efficient: Pael, after all, came from a world where everybody goes solar sailing on their vacations.

We worked steadily, for hours.

I ignored the varying aches and chafes, the increasing pain in my head and chest and stomach, the throbbing of a broken arm that hadn't healed, the agony of cracked bones in my foot. And we didn't talk about anything but the task in hand. Pael didn't ask what had become of Jeru, not once; it was as if he had anticipated the commissary's fate.

We were undisturbed by the Ghosts through all of this.

I tried not to think about whatever emotions churned within those silvered carapaces, what despairing debates might chatter on invisible wavelengths. I was, after all, trying to complete a mission. And I had been exhausted even before I got back to Pael. I just kept going, ignoring my fatigue, focusing on the task.

I was surprised to find it was done.

We had made a sail hundreds of meters across, stitched together from the invisibly thin immature Ghost hide. It was roughly circular, and it was connected by a dozen lengths of fine rope to struts on the panel we had wrenched out of the wreck. The sail lay across space, languid ripples crossing its glimmering surface.

Pael showed me how to work the thing. "Pull this rope, or this . . ." the great patchwork sail twitched in response to his commands. "I've set it so you shouldn't have to try anything fancy, like tacking. The boat will just sail out, hopefully, to the cordon perimeter. If you need to lose the sail, just cut the ropes."

I was taking in all this automatically. It made sense for both of us to know how to operate our little yacht. But then I started to pick up the subtext of what he was saying.

Before I knew what he was doing he had shoved me onto the deck panel, and pushed it away from the Ghost ship. His strength was surprising.

I watched him recede. He clung wistfully to a bit of tangle. I couldn't summon the strength to figure out a way to cross the widening gap. But my suit could read his, as clear as day.

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"Where I grew up, the sky was full of sails . . ."

"Why, Academician?"

"You will go further and faster without my mass to haul. And besides—our lives are short enough; we should preserve the young. Don't you think?"

I had no idea what he was talking about. Pael was much more valuable than I was; I was the one who should have been left behind. He had shamed himself.

Complex glyphs criss-crossed his suit. "Keep out of the direct sunlight. It is growing more intense, of course. That will help you. . . ."

And then he ducked out of sight, back into the tangle. The Ghost ship was receding now, closing over into its vast egg shape, the detail of the tangle becoming lost to my blurred vision.

The sail above me slowly billowed, filling up with the light of the intense sun. Pael had designed his improvised craft well; the rigging lines were all taut, and I could see no rips or creases in the silvery fabric.

I clung to my bit of decking and sought shade.

Twelve hours later, I reached an invisible radius where the tactical beacon in my pocket started to howl with a whine that filled my headset. My suit's auxiliary systems cut in and I found myself breathing fresh air.

A little after that, a set of lights ducked out of the streaming lanes of the fleet, and plunged toward me, growing brighter. At last it resolved into a golden bullet shape adorned with a blue-green tetrahedron, the sigil of free humanity. It was a supply ship called *The Dominance of Primates*.

And a little after *that*, as a Ghost fleet fled their fortress, the star exploded.

As soon as I had completed my formal report to the ship's commissary—and I was able to check out of the *Dominance*'s sick bay—I asked to see the captain.

I walked up to the bridge. My story had got around, and the various med patches I sported added to my heroic mythos. So I had to run the gauntlet of the crew—"You're supposed to be dead, I impounded your back pay and slept with your mother already"—and was greeted by what seems to be the universal gesture of recognition of one tar to another, the clenched fist pumping up and down around an imaginary penis.

But anything more respectful just wouldn't feel normal.

The captain turned out to be a grizzled veteran type with a vast laser burn scar on one cheek. She reminded me of First Officer Till.

I told her I wanted to return to active duty as soon as my health allowed.

She looked me up and down. "Are you sure, tar? You have a lot of options. Young as you are, you've made your contribution to the Expansion. You can go home."

"Sir, and do what?"

She shrugged. "Farm. Mine. Raise babies. Whatever earthworms do. Or you can join the Commission for Historical Truth."

"Me, a commissary?"

"You've been there, tar. You've been in amongst the Ghosts, and come out again—with a bit of intelligence more important than anything the Commission has come up with in fifty years. Are you *sure* you want to face action again?"

I thought it over.

I remembered how Jeru and Pael had argued. It had been an unwelcome

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perspective, for me. I was in a war that had nothing to do with me, trapped by what Jeru had called the logic of history. But then, I bet that's been true of most of humanity through our long and bloody history. All you can do is live your life, and grasp your moment in the light—and stand by your comrades.

A farmer—me? And I could never be smart enough for the Commission. No, I had no doubts.

"A brief life burns brightly, sir."

Lethe, the captain looked like she had a lump in her throat. "Do I take that as a yes, tar?"

I stood straight, ignoring the twinges of my injuries. "Yes, *sir!*" ○

OBJECTIVE COMPARISON

Our universes
are parallel;
but mine
has better lighting
and
less entropy.

—Timons Esaias

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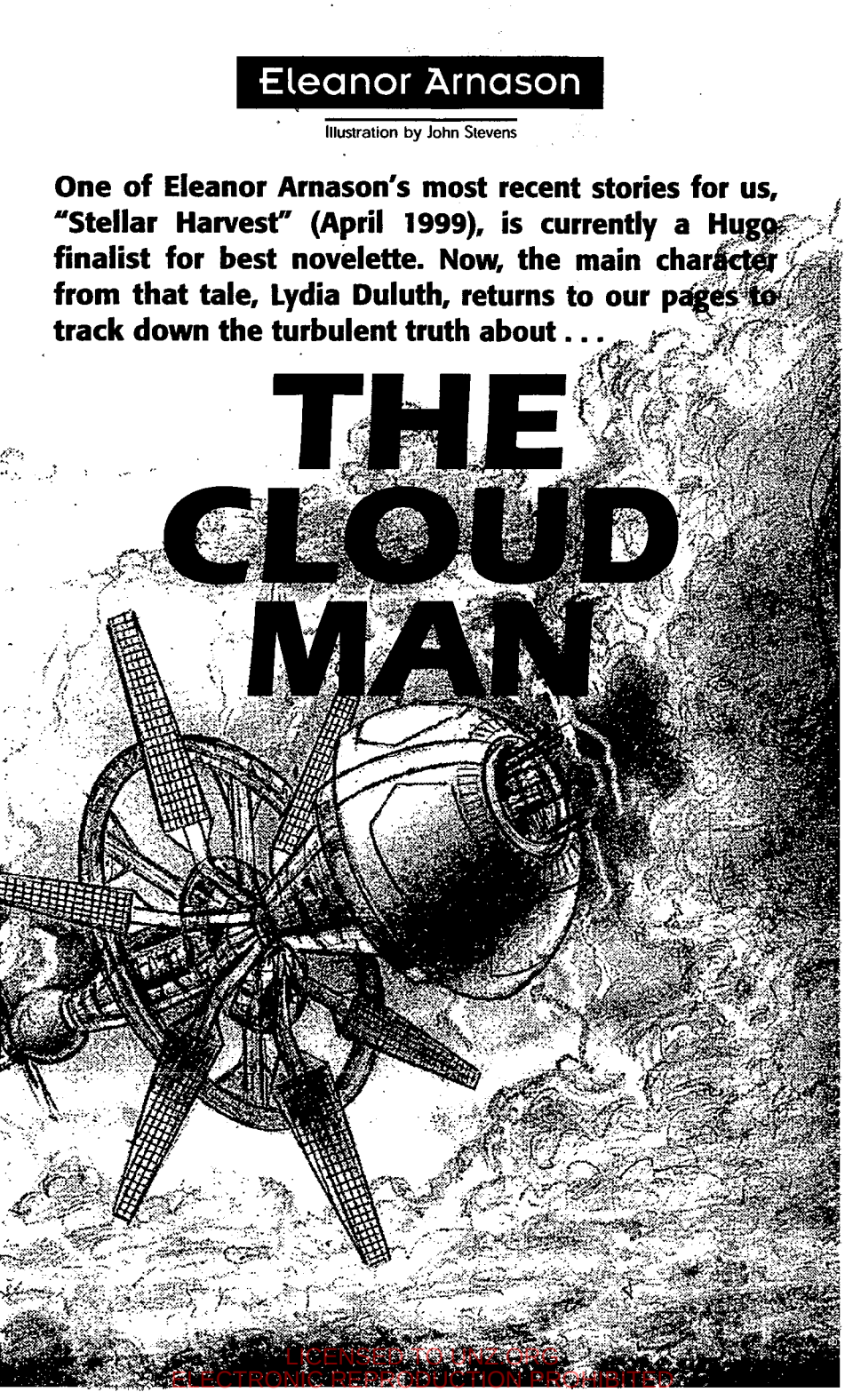
Eleanor Arnason

Illustration by John Stevens

One of Eleanor Arnason's most recent stories for us, "Stellar Harvest" (April 1999), is currently a Hugo finalist for best novelette. Now, the main character from that tale, Lydia Duluth, returns to our pages to track down the turbulent truth about . . .

THE CLOUD MAN



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The adventure began at a research station floating in the upper atmosphere of a gas giant named Big Boy. The air around the station was clear. Looking up, Lydia Duluth could see a dark blue sky crisscrossed with pale narrow lines. According to the station's resident scientist, these were high clouds, a contrail and the planet's rings seen edge-on.

Below them, a thousand meters down, was a lumpy floor of altocumuli the color of tomato cream soup. In the east the planet's primary was coming into view, spilling blue-white light across the enormous cloudscape; and the west was occupied by a pale pink cloudwall that rose far, far above the station's current altitude. Lightning flickered over the wall. A white froth of cirri topped it, pulled into streamers by the wind. Buddha, what a wind it must be!

"The Rose," said the scientist, Nadine Buenos Aires, gesturing toward the wall. "It's the oldest known storm in the galaxy."

We discovered it, said the AI that was fastened to the inside of Lydia's skull, its metal and organic tendrils going deep into her brain and down her spine. *Nine thousand two hundred and two human standard years ago. We did not name it The Rose.*

Of course not, Lydia thought. Rose was a human word. The AIs had discovered Earth long after they discovered the storm. What do you call it? she asked without speaking aloud.

Our languages are too different. I cannot translate the name into humanish.

"You have that look again," Nadine said. "Glazed Lydia. That thing in your head must be hell on your social life."

The real problem was her job: location scout for Stellar Harvest, the galaxy's premier holoplay corporation. She came; she saw; she recorded and then moved on, rarely returning to the same world twice. "No question it's amazing," she replied, looking at the towering Rose. "But drama is about intelligent life, and there's no life here."

"Except us," said Nadine, who was tall and long-legged with a high, round behind which suggested African ancestry. Her color suggested nothing. Thanks to Dixie Plum Skin Darkener and other comparable products, anyone could be as black as jet or onyx. For much of humanity it was the preferred color, offering maximal protection against the radiation of a thousand different suns. Her eyes, obviously artificial, were blue-green, as pale and clear as tourmalines. Her hair was short and frizzy, as black as her skin. Gemstones the color of her eyes hung from delicately scrolled ears. As scientists went, and Lydia had met a lot, Nadine was a wolf. Was that the right ancestral animal? A hawk? An eagle? A glorious organism. Lydia could feel herself falling just a bit in love.

"What would happen if the station went into the storm?" she asked Nadine.

"We send in robot probes," Nadine said. "They're heavily armored. If we're lucky, they last long enough to give us some data."

"The station would be destroyed?

"Imagine a party balloon—one of the pretty, shiny ones made of metal-plastic film and filled with helium—inside a factory food processor. Now, imagine the processor turned on to maximum speed."

"You're saying it wouldn't last long enough for a holoplay."

Nadine nodded.

"What if the station began losing altitude?" Lydia asked.

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"The planet's surface is metallic hydrogen, wrapped around a core of stone. Long before we reached it, we would be a smear or vapor of elements rare in this environment."

None the less, Lydia thought, it might work as a story. Damage is done to the station's floatation system, maybe through sabotage; and it drops like a deflating party balloon slowly into the maelstrom, while its occupants struggle to repair the damage. Was maelstrom the right word? Lydia realized she wasn't sure of its meaning.

A legendary whirlpool on Earth, said the AI. *According to my dictionary, the name means "grinding stream" in an obscure human language, which is not spoken among the stars, though it may still exist on Earth.*

The station would have to be bigger, with more staff: a hero, a villain, a coward, a group of interesting minor characters, and someone as luscious and wolf-like as Nadine. The Nadine character didn't have to be female or human. This was a possible role for the new actor Wazati Tloo. He combined an air of sweet innocence and vulnerability with a quite extraordinary masculine beauty; and Lydia had discovered him, which gave her a percentage.

"The situation has possibilities," Lydia said and recorded the Rose, aflicker with lightning, then the planet's sunlit rings, the floor of altocumuli, and the eastern sky. A long thin cloud floated above the primary. Closing in with her recorder, she discovered the cloud was spiral-shaped. What the heck? She handed her recorder to Nadine.

"That is a Kelvin-Helmholtz cirrus," the scientist said. "You find them on most planets with clouds. They rarely last long, and they form so high in the atmosphere that it's uncommon to see them from a planetary surface.

"I love the name! The nineteenth century is when my kind of science began. Heat! Electricity! Magnetism! Wave mechanics! The motion of gases! The real stuff, not those dreary solids."

"What does the name have to do with the nineteenth century?" Lydia asked.

Nadine gave her a look of horror. "Helmholtz and Kelvin! They were two of the greatest physicists of the nineteenth century, and both names have been attached to one kind of cloud."

Lydia took another look. The spiral cloud was gone.

Other companies would take a scene like this and use the recording to make a background for actors working somewhere else entirely, lightcenturies from the background planet. A much safer and cheaper method of production. But her employer had built its reputation on authenticity. When audiences saw a Stellar Harvest holoplay, they knew they were seeing real actors in a real environment. Yes, of course, there were alterations in the process of editing, but the original recording was real. If Ramona Patel was seen in front of an exploding ice volcano, then by the Buddha, she had really been there; and the ice crystals had actually come glittering down around her, coating her atmosphere suit, while she—in a monologue that did not make the final version—bitched about the suit's discomfort and the fact that her millions upon millions of fans would not be able to see her astounding beauty "encased in this coffin."

What she would say about this place did not bear thinking of. Ramona usually did religious musicals. The ice volcano drama had been an attempt to use her in an action story. A mistake, though the setting had been splendid. But to be at her best, to do what her fans expected, Ramona needed hundreds of gods and goddesses, all singing and dancing, while she—her

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body adorned, but not hidden, by a costume made of scarves and jewels—flirted with the hero, a handsome avatar.

There was a real element of risk here, which meant second and third rank actors, people on the way up or down. Definitely not Ramona Patel, the company's best draw on a thousand worlds, populated by Lydia did not know how many kinds of beings.

"What else is there to see?" she asked.

"More clouds, layer after layer," Nadine answered. "We've dropped probes. I can ask my computer to assemble a report of what we've found: wind speed, atmospheric pressure, chemical composition, electrical activity, heat."

"Do you have any visuals?"

"Some, and the computer can make more. But it gets dark down there, Lydia."

"If it wouldn't be too much trouble," Lydia said. Nadine left the room.

Why did Dr. Buenos Aires say she would "ask" her computer to compile a report? It is not intelligent.

"Are you sure?" Lydia asked, continuing to record.

Artificial intelligence has been created only once, the voice in her mind said firmly. *The programs you humans write produce an illusion of thought, but not the actual process. The best programs can pass a Turing Test. They cannot pass a *** Test.*

"A what?"

It is a name—a designation—which cannot be translated into humanish, like our name for the Rose.

Odd, thought Lydia. She was almost certain she had seen something when the AI gave the name of its test. If so, this was a first. The AI was able to gather extensive data from her system: electrical impulses as they ran along her neurons; the levels of hormones in her blood and neurotransmitters in her brain; a lot about her immunological system; most of what she saw and heard and felt. In return for all this, she got only a faint, impersonal voice. A metallic whisper.

"Say the name again," she told the AI.

There is no point. You will not get it.

"Try," Lydia said. "As a courtesy."

Very well, the AI said.

There was a noise like static; the cloudscape in front of her vanished. In its place was mesh made of interlaced helices. The helices twisted improbably around their points of intersection, never disengaging or becoming more tangled. Lydia had the impression they were rotating through more than three dimensions.

The static grew louder; the helices whirled more rapidly. "Okay, okay," she told the creature in her skull. "That's enough."

The noise stopped. The helices vanished. She was looking at the Rose.

You perceived it, the AI said.

"Accurately?"

No. Not at all. Our thought has a wonderful clarity, compared to human thought and language. But it's obvious that something got through. I was designed to observe you closely, while causing the least possible—what is the exact word? Interference? Transference? Feedback?

Lydia kept quiet, not knowing the exact word. There was a long pause. Finally the AI said, *I may have developed a problem. We should take me to an AI maintenance station.*

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"What will happen there?" Lydia asked.

If there is a problem—and we have, at the moment, only one anomalous event—it might be possible to repair me in situ. Or I might have to be replaced.

She had accepted the AI reluctantly, as the only way to escape a failed revolution and a long prison term. Now she considered the possibility of losing it. Was she glad? Did anyone look forward to brain surgery? "How hard would it be to remove you?"

Not difficult, though my organic components have increased in length and complexity since I was installed. If I were removed, they would be left behind to degrade and be absorbed. My metal components have changed much less, mostly in the places where they interface with the organic components. There has been some increase in my storage and processing areas, which are almost entirely metal. The metal will go with me, if I am taken out.

Buddha, thought Lydia. The AI was filling her like some kind of parasitic growth. She glanced at her hands, still holding the recorder. Did its tendrils—tentacles—whatever—reach into her fingers? "What would it be like?"

To lose large parts of myself? I don't know and do not wish to discover. None the less, we should go to an AI maintenance station. What if something goes seriously wrong? What if I harm you?

What would be worse? To have a defective AI in her head or to get a new one? Was it an option to have this one removed and not replaced?

I do not think so.

I need to finish here, Lydia thought.

Nadine returned, carrying two glasses of wine. "You're looking bothered," she said. "I thought this might help."

The research station kept human time. Big Boy did not. The giant's period was just under ten standard hours, so every human day had two sunrises and nightfalls. For the next few hours Lydia recorded the primary moving across the sky: bleaching the clouds with its brilliant noon light, then setting splendidly behind the Rose.

In the night darkness, the rings shone like brass. A yellow moon, large enough and close enough to be a disk, rose in the east, its light gilding the cloud floor. Nadine fixed dinner in the tiny galley. They ate in the observation room. Now and then, when she wasn't noticing the starry night or Nadine's wolf-like beauty, she would think about the AI and the possibility that it was failing. Finally, she went to bed.

A comm bell rang in the night, waking Lydia briefly. Nadine must have answered the call. The noise stopped. She went back to sleep.

In the morning, over breakfast, Nadine said, "I got a message from the main base. I have a family emergency, and it's not in this system. I have to go; so do you. We can't leave a civilian alone in a research station."

Good, said the AI. *We can accompany Dr. Buenos Aires to the system's star gate, then go on to a maintenance station.*

A dirigible-rocket came for them, lifting them to the top of Big Boy's atmosphere, then jettisoning its flotation system, which flew off like a series of huge balloons. Looking at the screen above her seat, Lydia saw the balloons for a moment, shining silver against the blue-black sky. Then the rockets fired, and they blasted away from Big Boy.

The research base was on a moon made of badly cracked ice. There were

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the usual craters, most of them eroded. The only thing that interested Lydia was the view. Big Boy filled half the moon's sky with glowing bands of color: pink, pale orange, pale red, a delicate brown. The Rose was a white oval.

Was there a drama here, among Nadine's colleagues? What if the storm, on which so many professional careers depended, began to break up after more than four thousand years?

"O Rose, thou art sick!"

It would have to be a psychological drama; and Stellar Harvest had built its success on action, romance and—to a lesser extent—religion, not the nuances of human psychology. For one thing, a significant part of the audience was non-human. Every species understood the drive to preserve one's genetic material; every species understood conflict and death. Religions varied hugely even among human cultures. But every species seemed to recognize the importance of certain questions. "How did we get here? Is this all there is? Is help available?"

Psychology did not travel. In addition, Nadine's colleagues were—as far as Lydia could determine—boring, as was the ice plain surrounding the research base and the low hills on the moon's horizon. The only things of interest here were Big Boy and Nadine. By the time the next ship arrived, an STL courier sent from the star gate, Lydia was more than ready to leave.

The gate was in space, of course, orbiting the system's star a short distance out from Big Boy, its position synchronized with that of the giant planet, so the two bodies paced around their primary side by side. En route, Nadine was silent and looked worried. Lydia read and slept. Changes in G made most other activities difficult. Thank the Buddha people did not have to travel long distances this way!

Like all gate stations, this one had been built by the AIs, using technology humanity did not understand. In spite of its inhuman design and construction, its appearance was oddly ordinary. Made of dull white metal and elaborately folded, it reminded Lydia of a napkin in a fancy restaurant. Parts of the station spun, providing G for travelers, though this was not evident from outside. It floated quietly in the perfect black of space, like something tossed off a god's dinner table.

Their ship docked at the napkin's tip. An elevator carried them into a region with G. So far as Lydia knew, they were the only living beings in the station. This was a small gate at the end of a local line. No one came here except scientists studying the Rose, an occasional eccentric tourist and a handful of people (like Lydia) with odd jobs. The station certainly felt empty, the air cold with a faint metallic scent, no sound except a faint hum, which might be the air system. They walked down a corridor with steel-blue carpeting. Ahead of them, the corridor curved up. Panels in the ceiling cast an intense light, most likely full spectrum solar, designed to ward off depression in humans. Larger stations, serving travelers of many species, had many kinds of light.

How often had she done this? Lydia wondered. Walked through corridors in gate stations, toward an incomprehensible alien device that would send her to a destination lightyears or centuries away?

Many times. The experience was still scary.

The corridor ended in a room with low tables and comfortable-looking chairs: a human waiting room, as disturbingly ordinary as the station's shape.

A voice, the station's AI, said in humanish, "You will be here approxi-

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mately four human standard hours while the gate mechanism is made ready. Sanitary facilities are through the green door. Food is behind the blue door. Do you have any preferences as to music?"

Nadine asked for Indo Bop and got it. The food closet provided vegetable curry with rice and some pretty good chutney, also decent beer. They ate. Nadine had a second beer and put her long legs up on a table, shoes off. There were holograms covering her toenails, as green as her eyes. Creatures swam in the holos' apparent depths. Sometimes they rose almost to the surface, but Lydia was never able to identify them.

"Why did you decide to leave the system?" asked Nadine. "You could have stayed at the moon base and gone back to Big Boy with someone else."

"I don't think Big Boy will work as the setting for a holoplay. I'll deliver my recordings to Stellar Harvest, and let the people there make the final decision. They're good at what they do; and I have a bias. I don't like claustrophobic dramas. A story ought to expand like the universe. But I can't think of a way to do anything except the old sinking submarine on Big Boy." She hesitated. "And my AI thinks it may be malfunctioning. We're taking it for a checkup."

"What's it like to have an alien in your brain?" Nadine asked.

Lydia shrugged. "Hard to describe. I'm used to it. You didn't mention what kind of family trouble you're having. Can you?"

Nadine finished her beer. "My father has vanished."

"On your home planet?"

"He left it and my mother and me years ago. His name is Benjamin Hani."

The name rang a very faint bell, but nothing specific came into Lydia's mind. The AI remained silent.

Nadine smiled. "In a sense, I've followed in his footsteps. But I study a single planet, a single storm, and do it with all the resources of modern atmospheric physics. He goes from planet to planet, making sure the clouds on every planet are the same, using equipment no more sophisticated than your recorder."

The Cloud Man! Of course Lydia knew about him. There was something else, besides his quest.

Benjamin Hani was a crew member on the first and only human star ship. It left Earth orbit in 2044. Five years later contact was lost. Six years later we arrived in your solar system, bringing humanity the gift of almost instantaneous interstellar travel. By the time the ship was recovered, damaged and off course, humans had spread through hundreds of systems. Instead of being the first humans to reach the stars, the crew was among the last, not counting the people who refused to go, of course.

The crew was thawed out, though not the cargo, which consisted of frozen embryos, clones of humans rich enough to fund an interstellar expedition.

"Your father was a starman," she said to Nadine.

"As well as the Cloud Man? Yes. He stayed on my home world for a number of years, but never fit in. Imagine a Neanderthal living among modern humans, though that's unfair. His abilities are not much different than ours, but his culture—We have the stars, Lydia! He is the product of an overcrowded planet, where humanity stewed in the poisons it had created. By the time the ship left, it was beginning to look as if the species had reached its end. The ancient rulers of Earth sent him out to convey their genetic material to safety. He failed in that endeavor and found himself in a universe he does not understand."

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"You said he's vanished?"

Nadine nodded. "He left my mother and me years ago, but kept in touch with me. I love him in spite of his failings. How can one blame a man for belonging to the past, when he actually comes from the past and has arrived in our present only through accident? It isn't as if he chose to be out-of-date. He's been on the planet Tchel, looking at clouds. He went into the back country and vanished."

"You're going to find him?" Lydia asked.

Nadine nodded. "Or his body and establish my claim to his estate, if that proves necessary."

Drama was people. How could she pass up a story like this one? The legendary Cloud Man, a traveler from the past! And his daughter, a modern woman! Meeting together, if luck was on Lydia's side.

Can you delay? she asked the AI.

I'm not sure it would be a good idea. Who can say what will happen to me and you? But this is an interesting situation. And all my systems are checking out. The only problem thus far has been a single instance of excessive communication. In any case, I don't think I can stop you.

"Would you mind if I went with you?" she asked Nadine.

The scientist looked surprised. "Why?"

Reason one was the wolf-like Nadine. No question her long slim legs and artificial eyes were enticing, as was the way she said "Helmholtz." With so much passion! But now was not the time to mention this. Reason two was a reluctance to confront whatever waited at the nearest AI maintenance station. Lydia mentioned reason three. "It's a heck of a tale. If the planet looks interesting, maybe Stellar Harvest can use it as a location."

Nadine grinned. "You're a predator. You want my father's story."

"Art is predation," Lydia said. "Nothing about it is immediate or sincere. For those qualities, you have to go to life."

"By all means, come," Nadine said. "I would enjoy the company."

An hour before time to leave, they went to the gate room, lay down on beds and took the sedatives provided.

According to the AIs, sedation was necessary because the journey was not instantaneous. One arrived at one's destination at approximately the moment one left, but spread out in a kind of temporal cloud, so one reached "there," wherever "there" might be, both a little before and little after oneself. After an interval, not long, one coalesced at the most likely moment of arrival. The interval was unnerving; and it had proved impossible for intelligent organisms to cope with the experience without becoming upset. Better to sleep through it, though sometimes with bad dreams.

The Cloud Man was spread through time, Lydia thought drowsily. Maybe not into the future, but certainly into the past; and unlike FTL travelers, he was not able to coalesce. What an idea! Above her the gate room's lights grew dim.

Waking, she remembered there were other theories about the sedation. Maybe the AIs were hiding something: how to build a stargate or the true nature of FTL. Did people actually go from gate to gate? Or did the gates transmit information? Maybe a blueprint was sent and a new model built at one's destination, while the old model was destroyed or kept for—who knew what reason? "You are not the same people who left that station," as the old poem said. "Here between the hither and farther shore, while time is withdrawn, consider the future and the past with an equal mind." For all

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humanity knew, there might be entire planets populated by the previous versions of FTL travelers.

Nonsense, said her AI. *We hide nothing important.*

How to build a stargate, Lydia said.

Nothing else.

Lydia sat up stiffly and swung her legs to the floor.

Nadine was already standing. "Every time I wake from one of these trips, I feel a thousand years old."

Tchel was Earth normal, though cooler than the home planet, which had lost both its polar caps. Much of the local H_2O was locked up in ice and snow. Land covered 40 percent of the surface. Two continents, colliding in the northern hemisphere, had produced magnificent mountain ranges. The southern hemisphere was occupied by two pairs of continents pulling apart. A shallow ocean lay between one pair, while a deep rift valley separated the other two. As yet the valley was dry, except for a string of large, green lakes like jade beads. The vegetation was blue in forested regions, tan on the plains.

"Are there natives?" Lydia asked.

"Human colonists," said Nadine. "The planet's name is Atchin, but the Atch decided not to settle. There's something in the local ecology that gives them a horrible allergic reaction. It doesn't bother humans."

"Lucky us," said Lydia. Tchel was a beauty.

The capital city, reached by rocket-plane, stood at the head of a wide fjord rimmed by knife-sharp mountains. Ice floated in the jade green water. Brightly painted fishing boats were tied along the city's docks.

According to Nadine, humans could eat the local fish equivalents "after modification."

"The fish are modified?" Lydia asked, startled.

"Of course not. We are. The locals have the necessary alterations built into their DNA. You and I will swallow bacteria."

They found a hotel on the waterfront: two stories tall, made of concrete, with a metal roof painted red. Both their rooms had balconies and views of the fjord. Nadine went to get information from the local police. Lydia opened her traveling computer and input questions.

The planet had half a million inhabitants, almost all human. Settlement was restricted to the northern continent, while the southern hemisphere remained a preserve for the local ecology and a source of money for the colony, which needed to import a lot of information—medical, biological, technological, and so on, as well as some objects, mostly machinery and seeds. It paid for its imports with the money made in tourism.

After Lydia looked at images of the southern hemisphere's megafauna, she understood why tourism was a good source of revenue. There were people who'd pay a fortune to shoot a downy rhinoceros: five meters tall at the shoulder, with four, thick, fleshy-looking, orange horns on its snout. The animal was covered with pale yellow fur, which was closer in structure to bird down than to anything else. It had two eyes, one on each side of its massive head. They were tiny and looked mean.

As soon as she saw images of the rift valley, Lydia knew she had to go south. It varied in depth between one and five kilometers, in width between five and fifty kays. Starting at the edge of the polar ocean, it funneled cold air north, creating its own weather and ecological system. Much of the time,

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clouds filled it, hiding the jade green string of lakes. But when the clouds cleared, what a view! Sheer cliffs a kilometer or more tall, slopes covered with blue rain forest, the lakes. Toward the northern end, there was less precipitation and plains inhabited by creatures like the downy rhino.

What else? Lydia kept searching. Amazing waterfalls dropped into the valley. Snow-capped volcano cones rose along the western rim. Tourist resorts dotted the eastern edge, cantilevered out.

Oh Buddha, for Ali Khan, the great and now retired action star for Stellar Harvest. What Ali could do with a setting like this! Cliffs to rappel down, updrafts to ride in gliders, enormous animals to fight!

There were new actors coming up, though no one as physically adept or as charismatic as Ali. The setting and a good script would have to carry the holo.

Best of all, Tchel was not well known. Other holo corporations went to famous tourist spots and bored their audience with the same wonders over and over. Stellar Harvest made its reputation on familiar stories performed in unfamiliar places.

She closed down her computer and went out on the balcony to record snow-capped mountains and a green fjord.

After a while, Nadine returned. "He was in the south, in a resort on the edge of the rift valley. He'd already been at a ski resort in the northern hemisphere. The tallest mountains go almost to the top of the planet's atmosphere. Amazing! Though not, of course, unique. The clouds around the mountains are nothing new. Why should they be? The laws of physics don't change from one planet to another!

"Then he decided to look at the clouds in the rift—from above, first. But that wasn't enough for Benjamin Hani. He bought a permit to descend. They're expensive, but he has money. When the star ship crew left, they were promised that their pay would be waiting when they got back to Earth, no matter how long it took. The promise was kept; and the pay gathered interest. They are all rich, though not fabulously wealthy. There were bank fees and inflation.

"My father went into the valley and vanished. I intend to follow."

This could be dangerous, said the AI. *Remember that I don't have a radio transmitter built into my system. If you go with her and something happens, I will not be able to summon help.*

You know I'm going, Lydia thought.

Yes.

She felt a twinge of emotion—sadness? worry? fear?—and knew it was not her emotion, though it had been produced by her limbic system.

Is that you? she asked the AI

It cannot be, the AI said. *We do not have emotions.*

No, thought Lydia. But most AIs do not have organic components; and most are not connected to a living creature's nervous systems. Damn it all, you are woven right through me. How can anyone know what the result will be?

They flew south. Scattered cumuli cast shadows on a flat green ocean. Here and there were islands, rimmed with surf. A tawny plain followed. Late in the afternoon, they landed. Climbing down to the tarmac, Lydia smelled heat, dust and something else. Dry vegetation, she decided after a moment. Not entirely familiar—every planet had its own tang—but recognizable. Small clouds dappled a sky tinged faintly green.

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"A mackerel sky," said Nadine. "It's a kind of fish on Earth, possibly still in existence. I don't know if the clouds are supposed to resemble scales or schools of fish."

A resort vehicle picked them up. They bounded over a rutted dirt road. Looking out, Lydia saw low, dun-colored plants and isolated trees that reminded her of antique reading lamps. A pair of narrow trunks rose side by side to a wide-based pyramid that was almost certainly foliage. "Why two?" she asked.

"Trunks?" said the driver, a black-skinned human. "The seeds come in pairs. Each one puts out a shoot. They grow up side by side and combine their branches in a single crown. Now and then there's a singleton or a triplet. Their crowns are less perfect in shape."

She recorded the trees and a herd of quadrupeds, approximately horse sized, but with longer necks and dull-green hides. Their tails were long and serpent-like; they had no manes.

"Olive okapi," said the driver. "Since the planet has no natives, we use Earth names for the fauna. Wait till you see the giant flightless robin. It's carnivorous."

They arrived at the resort: low concrete buildings with tile roofs. Double trees grew around the buildings, casting shade, and there were gardens full of plants with brightly colored leaves. The driver carried their baggage in, setting it in a cool, tiled lobby. One wall was transparent. Lydia wandered over.

Before her and below her was the rift: a huge space filled with mist, which boiled like the witches' caldron in the opera *Macbeth*. The sky above the mist was sunlit and cloudless. She could not see the valley's far wall or its depths.

The driver came over to stand beside her. "Quite a sight, isn't it?" he said. "Your reservation listed your employer as Stellar Harvest."

"Yes."

"Are you thinking of making a holo here?"

Lydia sighed and turned, looking him in the eyes, which were bright blue and obviously not artificial. The hair falling loose over his shoulders was auburn, thick and curly. "Dixie Plum?" she asked.

"Genetic alteration. The star produces more ultraviolet radiation than we were designed to take. Be careful while you're here."

"What about your eyes?"

"Sunglasses, when I'm outside." He smiled. "I'm vain about the eyes. This color has been in my family for generations. My name is Olaf Reykjavik."

They shook, the ancient gesture which had been retained by almost all human cultures. "About that holo," Olaf said.

"I don't make those decisions," Lydia replied.

"But you are a location scout."

She nodded reluctantly.

"I suppose I ought to be equally honest," he said. "I am the Minister of Tourism."

"Oh shit," said Lydia.

He laughed.

Nadine finished signing in; and the two women went to their suite. The sun was setting, pouring brilliant light through the windows. They showered and put on new clothes, then went to dine in the resort restaurant.

By this time, the sun was down. Outside, a blood-red sunset gave way

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gradually to darkness. Oddly scented candles burned on the restaurant tables, which were mostly unoccupied.

"The off season," said their waiter.

Startled, Lydia glanced up. It was Olaf again.

"You can't possibly be the Minister of Tourism," she said.

"Why not? I recommend the fish, which is a local trout; a nice salad of genetically altered Earth greens; rice pilaf; and a Chardonnay made from grapes grown on the northern continent. Or—alternatively—okapi steak and a Cabernet Sauvignon."

They made their choices: okapi for Nadine and fish for Lydia. Olaf brought them two bottles of wine. "Courtesy of the Ministry of Tourism."

Lydia sighed and nodded.

Olaf opened the bottles and poured, every motion deft and professional. "We have a small population and a history of democracy. When something needs doing, whoever's nearest does it. In addition, my family used to own a resort. I grew up working there. You name it, and I've done it: driver, waiter, cook, mechanic, guide."

"Did you make dinner?" Lydia asked, when the fish arrived, grey outside and pale green within. The salad was sprinkled with pieces of seedless pomegranate. The pilaf was bright orange and flecked with something dark green, which had an undefinable flavor. Spicy? Nutty? Lydia could not make up her mind.

"No, I did not," Olaf said, "But I could have; and since your companion has decided to go into the rift, I'll be your guide and cook."

"Why?" asked Nadine.

"My job is to increase tourism. Your friend works for the most successful holoplay company in the known galaxy. Obviously I want to show her the beauties of our planet. Imagine what Ali Khan could have done with the rift! What a pity he has retired! Though you have that new fellow—what's his name? The one with golden skin and a mane?"

"Wazati Tloo," said Lydia.

"He'd look fine rappelling down a cliff or fighting a giant flightless robin with nothing but a knife against the animal's dangerous claws and beak."

"That may be," said Lydia. "But we're here to deal with Nadine's problem."

"The missing father. Do you want ground pepper on your salad? Or lemon for your fish?"

They made their escape finally, reached their suite and went to bed. Lying alone in darkness, the night outside her window full of unfamiliar stars, Lydia heard a voice.

Are we really going into the rift?

Yes, Lydia thought.

Why?

The rift is enormous, she thought in answer. Nadine is interesting and lovely; her father is a myth. There has to be a story here.

Your job is to find locations, not stories.

My job is to find settings for drama. No matter how spectacular a location is, if Stellar Harvest can't use it as the background for the kind of stories that Stellar Harvest tells, well—

I don't want to go, the AI said.

You have no choice.

For a second time, she felt a twinge of fear that was not hers.

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She woke early, roused by sunlight. The sky was empty, except for a few patches of white floating in the west. Peering, Lydia realized these were snow caps atop barely visible volcano cones.

The valley's mist was gone, and she had a true sense of its size. The far wall was dimmed by distance; shadows hid the valley floor.

There was a telescope in the suite's living room. She showered, dressed, went out and turned it on. Now she could see a waterfall on the western cliffs: a silver thread hanging down. The floor of the valley was covered with forest, mostly green. Knobby hilltops stuck out, bare of vegetation. In the valley's middle was a lake, long and oval and turquoise colored. Animals like birds soared over the water, white and apparently large, though how large Lydia could not determine, till she turned on the telescope's narrative function.

"Silver fish hawks," the scope told her. "Native to southern Tchel. The average body length is a meter. The average wing spread is three meters."

Impressive!

She remembered something she'd meant to do and went to a comm.

"Olaf?" said the person who answered at the Ministry of Tourism. "Yes, he's the Minister, and a darn fine guide and cook. You couldn't do better, if you're going into the rift. Mind you, his sense of humor can be hard to bear."

"Is that what it is?" Lydia said. After she turned off the com, she wondered how the person had known she was going into the rift. Were there no secrets on Tchel?

It took all day to arrange their expedition. Most of the work was done by Nadine and Olaf, while Lydia went on safari. The driver of her car was inhuman: a neutered male from the same planet as Wazati Tloo. Though he was dressed in human safari clothing, he managed to retain the slim elegance characteristic of eunuchs in his species.

"How did you get here?" she asked.

"Ennui. Wanderlust," he replied in strongly accented humanish. "I was not satisfied with my home and family. Nor was I necessary, since our planet is full of eunuchs. A more interesting question is, how did you get Wazati Tloo—a breeding male—off our planet?"

"Are you sure it was me?"

"Of course I am. Are you not persona non grata there?"

"Let's find some megafauna," Lydia said.

"You do not want to tell your story," the alien said. "Very well. I will find you terrifying beasts."

He did. Before the day ended, Lydia saw—and recorded—a robin as it ran down an olive okapi, then used its clawed feet and great hooked beak to rip its victim open. A nasty sight, the beak pulling out entrails and blood dripping onto the robin's red breast!

The driver also found a herd or flock of downy rhinos: huge, lumbering quadrupeds. Only the males had horns, which protruded to the side. At the moment, the horns were dull brown.

"They brighten in the breeding season," said the driver. "By the time the horns are orange, the animals are dangerous. All of existence seems to be about breeding, or so I have thought since I left my home. Sex and violence! Violence and sex! No wonder Stellar Harvest does so well!"

They returned to the resort at twilight. Exhausted, Lydia fell into bed. In the morning, she and Nadine and Olaf went into the rift.

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An aerial railway took them, gliding along the grey eroded cliff, past fantastic spires. Wind-twisted trees grew here and there. A waterfall dropped down a sheer stone wall. Their car went through its gauzy spray, which beaded on the windows, then dried.

"We sent the police, when your friend's father did not return as expected," Olaf said. "My cousin Olga went with them, a first-rate tracker. They found what we think was his last camp, but no sign of him. The camp was on a river. His inflatable boat was found ten kays downstream, below some very bad rapids."

"Why aren't you telling Nadine?" asked Lydia, looking toward her companion, who stood at the front of the car, staring out.

"She already knows."

"You think he's dead."

"Most likely. In any other situation, I would have been surprised we didn't find a body. Those of us who live here have been modified to the point that local life forms find us edible and nutritious. But they won't eat tourists, though they might kill one of you by mistake."

The robin. Lydia shivered.

This trip is not a good idea.

"But a body in a river, especially this river, might end up anywhere."

The valley floor rose toward them, solid forest except for a few, widely scattered hilltops.

"Most of the floor is debris from the cliffs," said Olaf. "It erodes easily. The hills are plugs of hardened magma, all that remains of a volcanic range; they do not erode easily."

Their car entered a gap in the canopy, swaying down between lofty trees with blue-green foliage. The trunks were all singletons. Lydia noticed. This must be a new species.

"I'm a child of the plains and prefer them," Olaf said. "Though I know the forest well."

"I certainly hope so," Nadine said, turning toward them. There was no longer a view for her to watch: only the straight, grey trunks of trees.

The car slowed, entered a concrete building and stopped. They unloaded their packs and pulled them on, then—as they stood on the station platform—Olaf checked all three of their rifles, making sure the safeties were in place. "Don't take them off unless I tell you. I have no desire to be shot by clients; and even with the safeties on, be careful where you point these things."

Lydia felt irritation. She was a practiced riflewoman and a fine shot. But it was never a good idea to argue with native guides.

Out they went, as soon he was satisfied. The forest air was moist and cool, full of unfamiliar scents and animal noises.

"Buddha! What lives here?" Lydia asked.

Olaf tilted his head, listening. "These are all bug and bird analogues. If there were any serious predators around, we'd hear warning cries or silence."

"What do we have to worry about?" Nadine asked nervously.

Lydia felt a twinge of worry, not her emotion, though it could have been.

Olaf clicked his tongue. "You should have done more research. Robins, of course. Dire pigs. An animal the Atch named: the *kwat*. The pseudo-apes are scary looking, but harmless unless you threaten them. The most dangerous animals, those that are poisonous or carry disease, cannot harm you. Your body chemistry is too different."

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"What about you?" Nadine asked.

"I can be harmed. We died by the thousands in the first few generations. But now we know what to watch out for; and I really am an excellent guide."

They took off along a narrow trail marked by human boots, Olaf going first, his rifle in hand. Glancing back a few minutes later, Lydia saw only forest; the station was gone from view.

For the rest of the day they hiked along the trail. As chatty as ever, Olaf pointed out examples of the local flora and fauna: vagina dentata plants, their appearance explaining their name; a flock of flying voles; a nest of sow ear bugs, hanging from a branch like a silk purse.

"Sour bugs?" asked Lydia. "Have people tried to eat them?"

Olaf spelled the name. "Don't ask me why. They look nothing like the ears on a dire pig."

Nothing was large or looked dangerous. The blood-curdling screams in the canopy came from a small and completely harmless bird, according to Olaf. "We really are quite safe. As a rule, predators attack animals they recognize as food. Your smell is all wrong, and mine is peculiar—to the local fauna, I mean. Humans don't usually complain about me."

It was the closeness of the forest that bothered her, Lydia decided. Like Olaf, she was a child of the plains, though her plains were on a far-distant planet. She was far more comfortable in a place where trouble could be seen coming for a hundred kays.

They made camp by a clear, smooth river.

"Benjamin Hani's camp is one day north of here," Olaf said. "An easy hike."

At twilight, a herd of dire pigs came to drink on the far side of the river. They were good-sized animals, hairless and pale, with fearsome tusks and large, frilly ears. The dominant sow scented them and cried her challenge, a sound like a bugle call.

"Don't answer," said Olaf. "It will make her angry. They can swim, though they don't enjoy doing so."

Nadine and Lydia were quiet till the pigs left, Lydia moving only enough to get her recorder. Her viewfinder adjusted to the light; and she could see the animals clearly, bristles protruding from the hides she had thought bare. One of the sow's two curling lower tusks was broken at the tip, but the other looked sharp enough, as did the animal's upper fangs.

"Are they carnivorous?" she whispered.

"Omnivorous," said Olaf quietly.

"How big?" she continued, focusing on the sow.

"The old lady is your height at the shoulder."

"Buddha!"

Olaf laughed softly. The pigs finally departed, and he added, "When we promise megafauna, we deliver. You can get a permit to hunt, though only using a projectile rifle. A laser would be unsporting and would not leave you with much of a trophy. Imagine how that old lady would look stuffed in your living room."

"Given the size of my living room, I would have to stuff her in; and there'd be no room left for me."

"How can you two joke?" Nadine asked. "This place is frightening. I didn't realize my father took such risks! And for what? To look at clouds from below! He could have found out everything he needed from above."

Lydia slept badly, though Olaf set out a perimeter warning system. She

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knew this particular product, having used it herself. It was excellent. Nothing could get close to them without alarms going off. Still, she had bad dreams. Maybe the problem was Nadine's fear, or the twinges of worry she got from the AI. At one point she was in a metal building: an AI maintenance shop, Lydia knew with the certainty one sometimes has in dreams. She had come to get her AI checked. But there was no sign of the AIs who should have inhabited the shop. Instead, the building contained a robin. It was three meters tall, with thick powerful legs, clawed feet and the hook-beaked, heavy head of a predator. Blood dripped from the beak, running onto the red chest. The animal was stalking her; and she knew—again with the certainty of dreams—that it would find her.

She woke. Overhead, the sky was beginning to lighten.

We should leave here at once and go to a shop, the AI said. *I assure you, it will not have robins.*

Lydia didn't answer.

Their trail went along the river. They followed it all day. Olaf pointed out more lifeforms, none menacing, though many worth recording.

Ali Khan had done many roles as a crusading environmentalist. This setting would have been perfect for him. If not a crusader, he could have been an ordinary person, a guide like Olaf, leading hunters who turned out to be criminals or entrepreneurs, plotting to destroy this pristine wilderness. Alas—again and again—for Ali's retirement! Though a man certainly had the right to stop working once he reached 112.

Was there a way to use Wazati Tloo here? Maybe he could be on the run from the law. An innocent man, suspected of some horrendous crime with no way to prove his innocence.

This was not too far off from the truth. If Stellar Harvest had not been willing to protect him, he would have remained on his home world, in something very like a prison. All breeding males were kept locked up. The planet's native culture believed that a man with all his parts could not be trusted; male hormones made him too erratic and aggressive.

Once Stellar Harvest got a look at his sleek golden body and rust-red mane, the company decided to take a chance on his behavior. It wasn't likely he could cause more trouble than Ramona Patel. Nor had he.

If the AIs had not found Lydia interesting, she would stayed in prison, too, though in her case she had been guilty as accused. As Tloo was, in a sense. His crime was being male and unaltered. Hers was being a revolutionary. Fortunately for her, the AIs decided they wanted to study revolutionary behavior from inside, since it was common in human cultures and difficult for them to understand. She was fortunate in another way, having done nothing to make the government of her home planet angry with her as an individual. They had plenty of dangerous and famous comrades to shoot and hang and lock up forever. She could be released.

Maybe Tloo could be a revolutionary, though it didn't strike her as a plausible role. He was too sweet.

Late in the afternoon, they reached Benjamin Hani's final camp. The river was running faster now, showing ripples and flecks of foam as it curled around boulders and went over small drops. Next to the first serious rapid, a hill rose, mostly bare.

"We have time to climb it before sunset," Olaf said.

"Why?" asked Nadine.

"To show Miss Duluth the view. It's magnificent. You can stay below."

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"Alone? No."

The climb was easy, due to steps cut in the rock. On the top was sunlight, a cool wind, and a view of the valley's eastern wall, lit by the planet's primary, now low in the west. The wall stretched to the north and south as far as Lydia could see, rising so far up it seemed about to touch the sky. For the most part, it was pale grey, but there were bands of other colors: charcoal grey, soft pink, pale yellow, a creamy white.

A fleck of something red floated before the cliff. Lydia lifted her recorder and focused. It was a one-person, open-frame glider with bright red wings. Another glider, this one blue, was farther down. "How do they get back?"

"The gliders? Updrafts. Now and then we have to rescue one. We tell them to land in Lake Elizabeth. Nothing lives there that's dangerous to tourists, and the gliders will float."

Lydia could imagine the gliders in a holoplay. They would be stunning! She made a recording, then the three of them climbed down.

They camped by the river a second night. Nothing disturbing came out of the forest. Waking in the morning, Lydia discovered a low grey sky. Mist drifted over the river and turned the forest trees into ghostly apparitions.

"A pity," said Olaf. "But common. The rift draws clouds."

Nadine said she wanted to see the place where her father's boat had been found.

"Why?" asked Olaf.

"I am beginning to think he's dead; and I would like—does this seem morbid?—to see the spot where he died."

"It's only the place where the boat came to shore. If he died, as I think he did, it was almost certainly between here and the boat's landing spot."

"None the less," said Nadine. "I want to go there."

Olaf glanced to Lydia.

"How far?" she asked.

"Less than a day's hike."

"Let's do it then."

He nodded.

The clouds and mist did not clear. They hiked through shadows. Most of the time, the river was next to them, rushing through one rapid after another. The far side was invisible. Late in the afternoon, they came to a bend. The river had slowed down. Small waves lapped a pebbled shore. "This is it," Olaf said.

Nadine knelt on the little beach and stayed some time, turning pebbles over, picking up a few, then setting them down. What did she think to find? Finally she rose. Tears shone in her pale green eyes. "I was unfair to him before, Lydia. He was a difficult father, always distant and preoccupied. My mother said it was because he lived in the past. I believe it was because he lived in no time—neither the past, which does not exist, nor in the present, since he had not learned the skills necessary to live in our universe. He was trying to find a place, I think, but never did.

"In addition, we argued about science. What is more interesting—universal laws or particular occurrences? What matters more—theory or taxonomy? I chose the universal, obviously, and he the specific. He had no choice. Modern theory was beyond him. All he could do was taxonomy.

"He did find some unusual phenomena. A few are unique, as far as we know now: the Hani corona, Hani spiral rain. Someone will be able to use his recordings, if I can discover what he did with them." Nadine looked at Olaf. "I need a death certificate."

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He nodded. "We will do almost anything to oblige a tourist or a tourist's heirs. You did not have to come here."

"I wanted to see—" She gestured at the misty forest and river.

They camped by the beach. It was turning out to be an odd journey, Lydia thought, almost elegiac. Not a Stellar Harvest holo, but something done by a small company for a human audience.

The morning was clear. Olaf said, "I want to show Miss Duluth Lake Elizabeth. We can make it in another day."

Nadine frowned and opened her mouth.

Olaf spoke first. "Believe me, Dr. Buenos Aires, I sympathize with your grief. There's little that's worse than losing a parent. But give me another day, another two days! I have a job to do; so does Miss Duluth; and Tchel really needs the money a Stellar Harvest holoplay would bring."

After a long moment, Nadine nodded. Lydia could tell she was unhappy about this change in their plans. A better person, someone with true compassion, would have sided with Nadine and turned back. But the valley was so impressive! And, as Olaf had said, he and she had jobs. Maybe they'd find something wonderful enough to distract the scientist. A landscape. An enormous animal.

The river led them toward the lake. Other streams joined it. It widened, then slowed, winding over level ground. Forest still surrounded them, though with breaks now, caused by giant okapi, according to Olaf. In places where the river bank was muddy, he pointed out three-toed prints.

"They are much larger than the olive okapi, as should be obvious from their prints, with a thicker build and a longer neck. Their heads are long and narrow, their upper lips split and prehensile. When they feed on trees, it's as if they have a pair of tentacles above their mouths, which gather leaves into bunches, twist them off and feed them in. Their appetites are such that they can turn dense forest into open glades."

He loved talking, Lydia thought, and his planet. Could she convince Stellar Harvest to make a documentary? Hardly likely.

Midway through the afternoon, as the sun began to set among towering thunderheads, they reached Lake Elizabeth: an expanse of blue-green water, flecked with whitecaps. In the east, the lake was rimmed with low cliffs. A sedimentary rock, Lydia thought, looking at the deep ravines and broken slopes. Forest topped the cliffs. Beyond and above the forest loomed the valley's eastern wall, dimmed by distance and lit by the afternoon sun, so it became a vast, hazy, golden barrier. The northern and western edges of the lake were invisible.

"It's inhabited by over twenty species of native trout," said Olaf. "Ranging in size from the fish you ate for dinner at the resort, Miss Duluth, to a filter feeding animal more than five meters long. The main predators are birds. The largest is a flightless diver almost as large as a basking trout. None is harmful to tourists."

They made camp for the fourth time, pitching a tent. Olaf urged them to sleep inside. "That storm in the west is going to break over us during the night. Believe me, we have weather in the rift!"

Lydia and Nadine complied. In the middle of the night, a crack of thunder woke both of them, though Olaf continued to sleep. Lightning blazed overhead, so intense that its light shone right through the tent walls. Lydia could see everything inside clearly: Nadine's anxious face and pale eyes, gleaming like gemstones; Olaf sleeping. He had moved an arm to cover his

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upper face, but otherwise had not reacted. Rain beat on the tent roof. Thunder cracked, roared and rumbled.

Nadine's lips moved. Lydia thought she was saying, "Oh my God."

The storm moved finally, thunder grumbling off to the east, lightning growing ever dimmer.

"Another reason I like theory," Nadine said. "One can think anywhere, but the collection of data leads to experiences such as this."

She is right, said the AI.

Are you sorry you aren't a theoretician? Lydia asked.

I would prefer not to have the experiences I am having at present. I did not intend—nor did my designers intend—that you and I grow together.

Olaf woke. They crawled out of the tent and discovered a drenched world. Water dripped from the forest canopy. Pools lay on the ground. At the edge of the forest—not twenty meters from them—stood a large, brown quadruped. Its legs were thick, its body heavy; it had a surprisingly long and slender neck, which ended in a long head, lifted at the moment. The animal was gathering leaves with its prehensile upper lip, while keeping one dark eye fixed on the campers. Its large ears twitched nervously, as did its long, muscular, snake-like tail. Lydia got her recorder.

The others stayed motionless. The animal continued to feed. At last, apparently satisfied, it moved into the forest, using an ungainly gait that was surprisingly rapid.

"How can you pass on the chance to show the universe creatures like that?" asked Olaf.

"The decision isn't mine," said Lydia.

After the tent dried, they packed it. Lydia walked on a lake shore a while, recording the water and sky. Birds soared overhead. Something surfaced far out. Focusing the recorder, she saw a dark back that quickly vanished. A giant basking trout?

Another motion—this one on the shore—attracted her attention. Glancing east, she saw a man walking toward her: broad and stocky, dressed in safari clothes. As the man came near, Olaf stepped out of the forest behind him. Apparently, the man didn't notice. He kept going till he reached Lydia, stopped and said, "Is Nadine Buenos Aires here? Is she all right? I'm her father."

"She is fine, Ser Hani," said Olaf.

The man turned. For a moment, it seemed he might try to flee. Then the set of his shoulders changed. "Do I know you?"

"Olaf Reykjavik, the Minister of Tourism for Tchel. I'm relived to know you're still alive. We don't like losing our tourists."

It was hard for Lydia to determine the man's age. How did one tell age in a person who belonged to another era? Obviously, he was no longer young, though not obviously ancient, either. His appearance was ordinary, except in being entirely natural. His eyes had dark irises and slightly yellow whites; his skin was black, his hair short and crinkled with a dusting of grey. As far as Lydia could tell, nothing had been altered or augmented. He was as nature had made him. Odd!

He wore a handgun in a holster at his waist.

"Could I take the gun?" asked Olaf. "I used to be a game warden and still belong to the auxiliary; and that does not look like a legal weapon to me."

"Do you think he's done something illegal?" Lydia asked.

"Besides bringing the gun into the valley? That will have to be deter-

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mined. But if his accident was a real one, why were we unable to find him? It looks to me as if he staged his own death, then vanished into an area where we do not permit any permanent settlements. Two days ago, when Nadine knelt on the pebble beach, she hid a message for him—right in front of us! It was very well done.

"But I was already suspicious. Being a game warden does that to a person; you can't imagine how people will behave when faced with megafauna! I wondered why she had spent so much time turning over pebbles, went back and searched." Olaf opened his hand, the one not holding Benjamin Hani's gun. On the palm was a round, silver ball.

Hani started and reached, then stopped himself.

"The signal was set for 'location.' I changed it to 'distress' and brought the ball along, thinking the signal might draw you, as it apparently did. Here you are, Ser Hani!" Olaf glanced past Lydia. "Here as well is your daughter!"

Lydia turned. Nadine brushed past her into the arms of Hani. The two embraced, the daughter taller than her father, but lacking his solidity.

Olaf watched them, still holding the handgun and message ball. Finally he said, "I'd like an explanation. Why did you vanish into the rift, Ser Hani? And why did you send your father a secret message, Dr. Buenos Aires?"

They pulled apart. Nadine said, "You can hardly call it a secret."

"Because I discovered it?" Olaf grinned, white teeth flashing in his dark face. "Do not attempt to trick people on their native soil, Dr. Buenos Aires. Why did you send the message?"

"There was something about his disappearance that didn't seem right to me. I knew, if he'd vanished deliberately, he must have his reasons. I wasn't going to track him down without permission. I recorded a message, telling him I was on Tchel and at which lodge, then set the ball to signal its location on the frequency and in the code we always used."

Interesting that Nadine and her father shared a code, Lydia thought. Why?

"And you, Ser Hani? Would you care to explain why you vanished?"

Hani hesitated.

"I have the ability to arrest you and your daughter," Olaf said. "Believe me, I'll do it, if I think it's necessary. Believe me as well, this area will be searched. Unless the thing you're hiding is very small, it will be found."

Lydia said, "I never realized that tourism required this kind of toughness."

"As I said, I used to be a game warden. It's a job that requires one be as cunning and mean as the people one is trying to stop and the animals one is trying to protect. Later, I was the Assistant Minister for Internal Security. In a small community, everyone has to try his hand at everything."

Hani sighed. "Maybe this is for the best. Since Miranda died, I haven't known what to do."

"Miranda?" asked Olaf.

"Dr. Miranda Schmidt. Like me, she was on the human starship. My area of expertise was meteorology; hers was embryology." He looked around at the broad lake, the distant valley wall. "I came here to visit and found her ill. I couldn't leave. Her charges were clearly unable to care for her."

"Charges?" asked Olaf.

"Let me tell the story," Hani said.

Olaf nodded. The two women kept quiet. This was starting to look like an interesting situation, Lydia thought. One does not interrupt a narrative when it finally begins to gather force and speed.

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"I knew if I vanished, search parties would be sent. I faked an accident and stayed with Miranda till she was gone. Then I thought, 'I can't leave the children.'"

"Children?" Olaf asked

"We were defrosted, but not the embryos that were our charges," Hani said. "Humanity decided it had enough bosses already. Why raise the clones of ancient leaders? If they turned out like their originals, they would be a burden on humanity. If they turned out differently, what would be the point? The galaxy is full of ordinary people. It's a pity that the ship's builders did not send the clones of artists and scientists. They might have been revived.

"In any case, Miranda thought this was wrong. The embryos deserved to live. We should complete our mission.

"She took a selection from our ship. It wasn't difficult to do, nor was storage a problem, given the advances in refrigeration. But the embryos needed parents. She came here sixty standard years ago, when the valley wall was bare of resorts, having discovered—your research systems are remarkable!—that the rift contained a life form similar to apes on Earth. In addition to her own skill, she had access to all the resources of modern genetic science, which are—she told me—amazing. Look at the three of you!"

Lydia glanced at Olaf and Nadine, seeing nothing unusual: a black man with curly auburn hair, a black woman with glittering green eyes.

"She modified the pseudo-apes, so they could carry the embryos and care for them after birth. It took several generations before she had the kind of parents she wanted. Her entire life has been devoted to this work! I admire her, though I could not do the same."

"Where are they?" asked Olaf.

"Less than a day's journey. I'll take you," Hani said.

They gathered their belongings and followed Hani along the lake, Olaf immediately behind the starman. Hani's gun was in the minister's pack; and Olaf carried his own rifle.

Green water lapped the beach beside them. In front of them, the rift wall brightened as the sun moved past noon. The lower cliffs—made of sandstone, Lydia suspected—grew more distinct. There were caves as well as gullies. The wind carried—very faintly—the scent of burning wood.

Hani led them up a rubble slope toward the sandstone cliffs. Lydia glanced down, watching her footing. When she glanced up, they were surrounded.

"What the hell!" said Olaf.

The people were all over two meters tall and covered with shaggy red hair. The women had comparatively human faces; but the male faces were grotesque: beetling brows, broad puffy cheeks, and wide mouths with narrow lips and pointed teeth. A crest of bristly white hair went over each man's head, while more white hair—shorter and softer—rimmed his lower face. Mohawks, thought Lydia, and Lincoln beards.

"Boss," said one of the males to Hani in humanish, his voice deep and hoarse. "Who are these people? What should we do?"

Both men and women had spears with stone points or axes with stone heads. Aside from the weapons, they were naked. Their sexual organs looked human, as did the women's breasts.

Buddha!

"I don't know," Hani said.

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The male frowned. "Boss, you must know. We need to be told."

Another male said, "Maybe kill? Doc Miranda said, we had to be secret. It's for the children."

"Animals can be killed," a woman said. "Not people. Doc Miranda said this. We must care for one another and the children and stay hidden."

"We are not hidden now," said the second male. "Something must be done."

More people came down the slope. These were shorter and slimmer than the first group, wearing leather clothing and carrying more stone age weapons. Humans.

"The children," said Hani.

The first one reached them: a slender man with long blond hair, blue eyes, a suntanned skin. His clothing was a pair of shorts and a sleeveless shirt, laced up the front. The pale leather had been painted with spirals and rows of dots.

"The children drew as soon as they were able," Hani said. "The parents make nothing unless they're shown, and what they make is always useful in an obvious way."

"Who are they?" the blond asked, his voice sharp.

Buddha! thought Lydia, if only she dared take out her recorder. But the pseudo-apes looked dangerous, especially the males; and she wasn't entirely sure about the humans.

"This is my daughter Nadine," said Hani. "The other two, I don't know."

"I am Olaf Reykjavik, the Minister of Tourism for Tchel. This other lady is Lydia Duluth, a location scout for Stellar Harvest, the most successful holoplay company in the galaxy."

The blond man frowned and looked at Hani. "What's he talking about, Ben? I can tell he's speaking English, but I'm not getting the references."

"He's saying he's important, and the short woman is important."

"So are we," said the blond man. "Our originals ruled Earth. My original was richer than any other human. Are they rich? Do they rule anything?"

"I'm a civil servant," said Olaf. "Miz Duluth is an employee, though one who has the respect of her employers."

And, thought Lydia, we don't live in caves. We aren't hiding from the rest of humanity.

"What does this mean, Ben?" the blond man asked.

"The man does not consider himself or the short woman important in the same way as your originals," Hani said.

The blond man nodded. One of the pseudo-ape males, the one who had spoken first, said, "Can this wait, Child Bill? We need to decide what to do with these humans."

"We cannot kill them," one of the women repeated. Her breasts were long and flat, hanging so far down they touched her belly; and her red fur was frosted, especially around the eyes and mouth. It was the eyes that drew Lydia: entirely dark, they had an expression of sad intelligence. The same look was repeated in the eyes of all the parents, but not in Child Bill's blue eyes.

Of course, it was ridiculous to think that eyes by themselves showed any expression. It was the lids and brows, the rest of the face. One male, frowning, expressed puzzlement. Another, baring his sharp teeth, showed fear.

"We must remain hidden," another woman said, this one young and slim with small breasts that didn't sag. Lydia found her attractive, in spite of the fur and the not-entirely-human face.

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"Take them prisoner," said Bill.

"Please," said the largest male. "We must listen to Boss Benjamin. You are still a child, though we know you will become a boss in time."

"The time has come," said Bill and brought the shaft of his spear down on the pseudo-ape's head. The male howled and fell to his knees. What a skull he must have! He was still conscious, groaning and holding his head, till Child Bill hit him a second time.

Olaf's rifle spun in his hands, and he used the butt to club Bill. The blond man collapsed.

Screaming, the pseudo-apes attacked. Lydia went down in a heap of furry, strong-smelling bodies. Hands grabbed. Her rifle was gone. She kicked. Hands held her legs and shoulders. She felt teeth rip through her jacket's fabric. Wet breath blew in her ear. A hard, sharp fang pressed against her neck. Were they cannibals? There was a tearing sound.

Not her flesh, thank Buddha, but the strap of her back pack. A moment later, the pack was gone; and she—weaponless, her clothing in rags—was yanked upright.

The rest of her company stood nearby, all prisoners, except for Benjamin Hani. No one held him, though his clothes were as badly torn as hers and Olaf's and Nadine's.

The apes were not fools. They had managed to rip out everyone's pockets and to remove all the packs. Nothing that remained was likely to hide a weapon.

The clone children had kept back during the fight. Now they were gathered around Child Bill, who was sitting up and rubbing his neck. Finally he raised his head. "How dare you?" he said to Olaf.

"You're going to have a nasty bruise on your shoulder," the Minister said. "But I doubt there'll be any permanent damage. Do you have any idea how dangerous a blow to the head can be? You might have killed that poor modified pseudo-ape. If he is an animal, I arrest you for violation of the Native Fauna Protection Act. If he is a person, I arrest you for attempted murder."

Bill laughed, a savage sound.

Now Lydia regretted not using her recorder. It was in her pack, which a female held, thoughtfully testing the fabric with tongue and teeth. In a minute or two, Lydia imagined, the woman would be chewing on the recorder.

I can record from your nervous system. When we reach an AI maintenance station, the recording can be downloaded.

When? If!

Remain alert. Keep looking around.

Other pseudo-apes held their rifles.

"Fire sticks?" asked one, a male.

"Hardly," said Olaf. "Lasers can start a brush or forest fire, especially this time of year. These are projectile weapons."

The pseudo-ape looked puzzled. "You throw it? Like a stone or spear?"

Olaf opened his mouth, then closed it. Easy to see what he was thinking. If the apes did not know how guns worked, no one should tell them. Not that they'd be able to use the rifle. All were locked, Lydia sincerely hoped.

Child Bill rose, helped by his human companions. "In the absence of Doc Miranda and given the fact that Boss Benjamin has apparently betrayed us, I proclaim myself the first child boss. May my rule be endless!"

The other humans looked startled. One opened her mouth. Bill whirled

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and slapped her across the face. "Your original was the ruler of a miserable island state, threatened by class war and global warming. For all we know, it's under water now, its inhabitants all drowned. You can't challenge me, Meg!"

The woman stepped back, the mark of the slap bright red on her face. She looked angry and unconvinced, but said nothing.

"We will imprison Boss Ben and his companions," Child Bill said. "In time they will die; and our problem will be solved."

This plan has flaws, the AI said. *Is Child Bill operating in an optimal—or adequate—fashion?*

We'll see, thought Lydia.

The four of them, five with the AI, were herded up the slope and into a cave. Narrow at the entrance, it widened into a lofty room. The stone floor had been swept, except at the center, where ashes lay in a heap.

There were images on the wall: hand prints done in red and crude but recognizable drawings of the local fauna. A giant okapi confronted a downy rhino. Dire piglets followed a sow with huge tusks and heavy dugs.

"You see," said Benjamin Hani. "Art. Done by the children, never by the parents."

"You will stay here until you die," said Child Bill. "Our parents will guard the entrance."

"They must have food and water," said the grey-haired female.

"Why?" asked Child Bill.

The ape woman frowned. "If we don't let them out to forage and don't bring food and water in, they will die of thirst and hunger. Is that not the same as killing?"

"Action is not the same as inaction," Child Bill said. "Failing to help is not the same as doing harm."

The pseudo-apes looked unhappy, as did some of their human children.

"We cannot reason the way you can, Child Bill," the largest ape man said finally. "Therefore, we will reason as well as we are able with our less advanced brains. Killing is killing; and Doc Schmidt told us not to kill people. We will bring these humans food and water."

"They may live for decades," said Bill. "Think of the burden they will be!"

"Killing is killing," the ape man repeated.

"And forbidden," said the old ape woman.

Bill frowned and nodded grudgingly. Their captors filed out. Lydia and her companions were alone. Dim light came through the narrow entrance. The dry air smelled of smoke and pseudo-apes.

Nadine sat down on the stone floor, her dark skin dull with exhaustion. Benjamin Hani knelt beside her, an arm around his daughter's shoulder. Olaf prowled along the cave wall. "There are scratches around the paintings."

"The children perform ceremonies here," Hani said. "They have invented abstraction and religion, though Miranda—a strict rationalist—discouraged the latter."

"Throwing sharp sticks at the paintings, I suppose. Why didn't she give them modern weapons? Not, mind you, that I'm complaining. We'd be dead now if that nasty little man had a working gun."

"The oldest are in their early twenties, just emerging from adolescence; and they were raised by pseudo-apes. Miranda felt they could not be trusted with modern technology, at least not yet; and she had theories about the emergence of human culture, which she wanted to test."

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"Mad, utterly mad," Olaf muttered. Completing his circuit of the cave, he came to stand over Nadine and her father, feet set wide apart and arms folded. "You realize it's illegal to modify this planet's native fauna; and these creatures can almost certainly pass a Turing Test. Your crazy doctor has created a new intelligent species, which is illegal on every human planet."

"They cannot reproduce," said Hani. "The modifications necessary to enable them to incubate human embryos have made them sterile."

"You gave them no future and the intelligence to realize they have no future."

"Not I. Miranda."

Olaf shook his head. "You knew about this project and did nothing to stop it. The nasty little man is wrong. Refusing to act does not make one innocent."

"What difference does any of this make?" Nadine asked. "We're trapped here."

"Until my comrades come to rescue us," said Olaf. "You are not the only person able to send hidden messages, Dr. Buenos Aires."

"You have a message ball?" asked Lydia.

"I have radios woven into the fabric of my boots."

"Why boots?" said Hani.

"They're something one rarely loses while hiking; and there is a predictable pattern of use. One takes them off at night; one puts them on in the morning and hikes. Pressure sensors tell a pair of small computers if the boots are being used normally. If they aren't, the radios broadcast an emergency signal."

Sentient boots, thought Lydia with pleasure.

Sentient in the sense of feeling or being capable of perception. I doubt the boots can pass even a Turing Test.

As opposed to a spinning helix test, I suppose.

Much more accurate.

"All I need to do is keep the boots on tonight," Olaf said. "The mayday will be sent. Thanks to the radios' ordinary signal, which gives my position at all times, and the satellite in geosynchronous orbit above the rift, my comrades will have no trouble finding us. Only a fool goes into the wilderness without backup, though we do not usually tell our tourists how careful we are."

"How strong is the signal?" Lydia asked. "Will it get through this?" She waved around at the cave's stone walls.

"If it doesn't, my comrades will come all the more quickly. We take it very seriously, when someone's boots go silent."

A pair of pseudo-apes came in, bringing stew in a glazed clay pot, a jug of water and four spoons carved from horn. After the apes left, Lydia asked, "Have they invented pottery?"

Olaf lifted the jug and looked at its bottom. "Tau Ceti State Ceramics Factory," he read. "Apparently not."

"They weave baskets," Hani said, "and have learned to smear the exteriors with clay, so the baskets hold water and are—to an extent—fire proof. They sew and make bags of leather. They can chip or carve most hard materials. The children paint and sing and dance. But we are still in the Paleolithic. Pottery, metallurgy, and agriculture remain in the future."

"What was Dr. Schmidt trying to do?" Lydia asked, keeping her tone one of polite curiosity, though she shared Olaf's opinion. The doctor was stark crazy.

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"She wanted to see what would happen if the best genetic material of the twenty-first century was put at the start of human history. Would humanity progress more quickly? Would we be more rational? Also, as I mentioned before, she was afraid of what the children would do, if they had access to modern technology. If nothing else, they would attract the attention of the local police; and Miranda's experiment would have ended—" He paused.

"In child or animal protection court," said Olaf. "What kind of world did you come from, to permit these crimes?"

"A world that was dying," Benjamin Hani said. "Where only the rich had hope, and even they had little hope. Why do you think they sent their clones to the stars?

"They planned to retreat to space colonies and wait for news of new planets. The rest of the species would die, except for a limited number of artists, scientists and technicians, who would be taken to the bosses' colonies and be grateful they had escaped the common fate." Hani smiled briefly. "Upper servants, you might call us. The mass of humanity would be replaced by machines, if replacement was necessary. There really were too many of us, at least until the AIs came and evacuated most of Earth's population."

The home world was still barely habitable, though the population had dropped to half a billion. It was an odd sight: a dusty blue and white sphere, with celestial elevators ringing its equator, thousands of them extending into space, looking at a distance like so many silver wires. Most of the remaining population lived in arcologies in the far northern and southern hemispheres. The climate was better away from the equator; and the elevators, while stable, might some day fall.

Hundreds of FTL stations floated around the planet like folded napkins. Most were shut down now, their job done, humanity dispersed. Earth whirled among them like a dancer in a silver tutu.

Farther out, at the LaGrange points, a few space colonies remained, still inhabited by bosses who refused to join a universe where their power over other humans was limited.

"Let's not quarrel," Nadine said. "Until we're safe."

Olaf nodded and walked away.

Late in the afternoon, sunlight shone in through the entrance, though only briefly. Then the light in the cave began to dim. Sunset, thought Lydia. Olaf had gone back to pacing, clearly a restless person. Nadine and her father sat talking quietly. Lydia drank water, pining for her recorder and a glass of wine. Of the two, she'd rather have the recorder.

When the cave was almost dark, three male pseudo-apes came in. One carried branches. The second carried a covered ceramic pot. The third carried a spear. He stood near the entrance, spear in hand, watching them with eyes that must have better night vision than was typical of unmodified humans.

The other two apes built a fire and lit it from coals in the covered pot.

"It would be easier, if Doc Miranda had let us use her lighter," one said. "But the children are young, and we are less than human. She did not trust us with her tools."

"What happened to her tools?" asked Lydia.

"The children have them, but all the dangerous ones—the lighters and rifles—are locked; and the children can't unlock them. Child Bill tried after Doc Miranda was gone, by pressing her dead fingers against the locks on her rifles. But it didn't work. Apparently, the locks will only respond to a living hand."

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"We are going hunting tomorrow," said the man with the spear. "All the male parents. Child Bill says we will need a lot of food, if we're determined to keep the four of you alive. But our women are strong and moral. Don't worry that anything will happen to you while we're gone."

"You think Bill might try something?" Lydia asked.

"Of course not. He is one of our children. But if he does, our women can stop him."

"What are your names?" Olaf asked. "We should know our benefactors."

"I am Destroyer of Pigs," said the man with the spear. "My companions are Fish Hawk and Unexpected Thunder. These are long names, which we habitually shorten. He is Hawk; he is Thunder; and I am Pig."

Olaf introduced their little group, except the AI. He must not have learned about it yet, or he was being careful. "Do you know about shaking hands?" he asked when he was done.

"Yes, though I can't do it," said Pig. "I need both hands for the spear. But if you're willing to shake hands with us, Hawk and Thunder can perform that ceremony."

They shook hands, all except Pig. The pseudo-ape hands were long fingered and calloused. Their expressions, in the firelight, looked grave.

"We have to go now," said Pig. "But don't worry. We and our females will protect you. We were created to nurture human life."

The males filed out, Pig leaving last. Olaf put another branch on the fire. "A thoroughly likable species," he said. "They have all the gentleness of true pseudo-apes, combined with an intelligence I suspect is equal to ours."

"They attacked us," said Nadine.

"To protect their children. Such behavior can hardly be faulted."

"They are not creative," said Hani.

"So what?" Olaf said. "Most humans aren't, either; and I will take ordinary decency over creativity any day."

Lydia wasn't sure she agreed with this, though at the moment—comparing the children and their parents—she was willing to consider Olaf's proposition.

They finished the food and water. The cave had a little alcove in the back, which they used as a latrine. Finally, with a full belly and an empty bladder, Lydia went to sleep. She dreamed of Earth, a planet she had never visited. She was descending one of the elevators toward a brown desert. The air was full of dust. Shining through it was Old Sol, the ancestral primary, its orb as red as a robin's breast.

Waking, she was in darkness, the fire out. A few stars shone beyond the cave's entrance. She had a sense of a person standing under the stars. A guard, no doubt.

I have been thinking about what Olaf said, the AI remarked. *We have always wondered about the function of creativity in the human species. You consistently produce an intellectual vanguard and rarely pay attention to it, except when it angers you so much that you turn on it in one way or another. Think of Galileo! Van Gogh! Marlowe and Caravaggio! Gandhi, Trotsky, Moonray, Mai Beijing! Think of yourself, in your little revolution that failed so utterly! Obviously, the species as a whole is resistant to change and suspicious of new ideas. Yet you keep producing change and new ideas. Why? You could make do with the kind of intelligence the pseudo-apes have.*

Is ordinary decency better, at least in the opinion of most humans? If so, why are humans not more decent?

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Can't tell you, Lydia thought and went back to sleep.

Waking a second time, she discovered it was morning. Her companions were rousing themselves and visiting the alcove at the back of the cave. This place was going to stink. Olaf's comrades had better arrive quickly.

No one came to bring them food. After a while, Olaf said, "I want to see what's going on."

He walked out the entrance. "Lydia!"

She followed.

Two pseudo-ape females lay huddled outside. Olaf knelt by one. "Unconscious, but still alive."

Lydia checked the other, the grey woman with sagging breasts. She also was breathing, though unconscious.

"This does not look good," Lydia said.

"Nor that," said Olaf.

She lifted her head. The children were coming toward them, spread out in a long line, both men and women armed with spears or axes. Child Bill was in the center. He and the men closest to him carried rifles.

Oh shit. Lydia stood. So did Olaf.

"Our male parents left before dawn," said Child Bill. "We have drugged our mothers. Dr. Schmidt locked her guns, but not her medical supplies. Stupid of her! If you want to live, you will unlock the rifles we carry. They are yours."

"No," said Olaf.

Offer to do it, the AI said.

They'll kill us as soon as the rifles are unlocked, Lydia thought.

You are almost certainly correct. None the less, offer.

No.

"I'll do it," Nadine said behind her.

"Are you a fool?" Olaf asked.

"What choice do we have?" Nadine asked.

"Let me," said Lydia and walked toward Bill.

"There'll be no reason for them to keep us alive!" Olaf cried.

Lydia kept walking. Her body felt odd, nerves tingling. Everything around her seemed unnaturally sharp and clear and slow. Looking into Bill's pleasant young face, she read her death sentence.

Bill held out a rifle.

"Not mine," she said and pointed at another weapon.

"Remember," Bill said. "If you try anything, we'll club you down and kill you with our spears. You are a small woman and can hardly be as fit as we are."

Lydia nodded, holding out her hand.

Bill's companion gave her the rifle. At the same moment, she lost control of her body. Her arms moved; the rifle butt drove into the gut of the man in front of her. Buddha, she was quick! As he staggered, she dove past him and rolled. It was an odd, twisting motion; as she came up, she felt a tearing pain. Dammit! She had injured something! That didn't stop her body. It turned; and she was firing. What a shot she had become! Every bullet hit. Men and women fell screaming. Those who did not fall ran.

"Stop!" yelled Olaf.

The rifle fell silent. Lydia stood shaking. Pain stabbed her like a multitude of knives. After a moment, she fell to her knees, the gun sliding from her hands.

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I am afraid I have done some damage to your joints, muscles and tendons. You were not designed to move so quickly. Obviously, it was not necessary, given the speed of your natural enemies.

You did this? Lydia asked.

The damage? Most of it, yes. Though the man who drove a spear into your back must share some of the responsibility.

The children had dropped all the rifles when they fled. Olaf found his and unlocked it. "You two!" he said to Nadine and Hani. "Check the injured children. I'm afraid Lydia has killed several."

What spear? Lydia said to the AI.

It came out when you rolled, with some tearing of tissue. I do not think the injury is fatal.

She put a hand behind her, feeling wetness, looked at the hand and saw bright red blood covering the palm and fingers. I rolled with a spear in me? What if it had been driven deeper?

A possibility, which I tried to avoid by twisting in the roll.

You could have killed me, Lydia said.

They would have killed you.

The world had returned to its normal speed, but was dimming now. She could feel the wound in her back, deep and wide. Her shirt was soaked with blood. Blood ran over her buttocks and down the backs of her legs. Was she really feeling this? Her life draining away? Lydia fell into dark.

There were fragmentary moments of consciousness. She heard the sound of helicopters descending, then felt herself in flight. There was another motion. A gurney floating? Human voices murmured. Sunlight shone through leaves. Darkness returned.

When she woke fully, she found herself in bed. The room was unfamiliar. Beyond a large window, high clouds drifted: a fish scale sky. A human of indeterminate sex was seated next to the bed, tending the tubes that went into Lydia. He or she wore white, the ancient human color of medicine and death.

"You are doing well," the human said in a reassuring voice.

"The others?"

"Your traveling companions were not harmed. Benjamin Hani has been arrested for crimes against people and fauna. The pseudo-apes have been rescued and have appeared—already!—on the planetary net. What appealing creatures! The human clones will stand trial. And you will remain in bed. The damage done to your muscles and joints is quite remarkable. But we expect everything to heal."

Lydia dozed, carried to a golden planet by one of the opiate painkillers. Gods and goddesses danced in a vast, intricate hall full of balconies. Everything was suffused with a warm, hazy light. The dancers, dressed in gold-trimmed silk, gleamed like so many stars.

Thank the Buddha, Ramona Patel was not there.

Her periods of wakefulness increased, though she was always dozy and uninterested in the universe outside her body. Within her body was pain: a bone-deep ache when she was motionless, sharp stabs when she tried to move. The opiate did not end pain, but made her care less and made her dream—of golden palaces, Earth shrouded in dust, her own home planet.

Finally, she was able to get out of bed. An automatic chair carried her onto a patio overlooking the rift. In this region, the floor was a tawny plain. Clouds—cumulonimbi—towered hazily above the far wall; and there were

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other clouds below her: fat little puffs that trailed their shadows across the plain.

A telescope stood on the patio. Looking through it, Lydia saw animals on the plain: okapi of different sizes and colors. One species actually seemed to be covered with a checkerboard pattern. Downy rhinos among the okapi. One flock had a couple of youngsters, fuzzy yellow butterballs that bounded awkwardly after their mothers. Usually, she wasn't sentimental about children or young animals. In her weakened condition, she found the rhino chicks adorable.

Buddha, she was tired! Would the pain ever stop?

"I've never seen anything like it," Olaf said behind her. "I thought you had turned into Ali Khan, doing one of his famous, impossible-to-duplicate stunts. You saved our lives." Olaf set a chair next to her and settled into it. "Child Bill has admitted that he planned to kill us, once the rifles were unlocked. He knew my comrades would come looking for us. He was going to fake an accident. Our bodies would be found; my comrades would stop looking; the children would remain hidden. My own opinion is, his plan would not have worked. But we would have been dead."

"Did any of the children die?" Lydia asked.

"Of course. Those rifles are designed to stop megafauna. Everyone you hit was badly injured. They all would have died, if help hadn't arrived. All our helicopters carry trauma kits. As it is, three could not be saved."

"Who?" asked Lydia.

"The only one you might remember is Child Meg, the woman Bill slapped. Don't feel guilty, Lydia. It was them or us; and—I am told—you didn't actually do the killing. It was the thing in your brain, the AI. The doctors say it has infiltrated every part of your nervous system. They watch it growing daily on their scans."

I am self-repairing within limits; and we have become so closely interconnected that I have to repair you, in order to repair myself. That's why I'm growing so rapidly now and why you are healing so rapidly.

Rapid? You call this rapid?

"And," Olaf added, "when it acted, it almost ripped you apart. The doctors said the only descriptions they could find that fit your condition are of people who'd been tortured."

The rack, said the AI. *I apologize. If it's any consolation, we are so closely intertwined now that I can feel your pain.*

It isn't, Lydia thought.

"They've consulted with the nearest AI maintenance station. It's inclined to leave you intact. Nothing like this has ever happened before. No AI observer has ever grown into the person it was observing. You are a new kind of intelligent life, Lydia, like the pseudo-apes.

"The station wants to see you as soon as you're able to travel; and it won't let our doctors publish."

"What do you mean?"

"The AIs want to observe you, but they don't want humans involved in the study. It would distort their data, if you were followed everywhere by scientists. They want you to continue living an ordinary life.

"There are times, the station said, when work must be done in a laboratory. But the trouble with controlled experiments is too many factors must be eliminated in order for control to be retained. What's left is a severely limited and unrealistic version of reality: a two-dimensional map of a territory

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that extends through many dimensions. It's better, the station said, to watch, especially when faced with a new phenomenon. The AIs have told us, if our people try to publish, they will shut our star gate."

"That's not very nice of them," Lydia said. She was beginning to feel amused.

"No one ever said the AIs are nice," Olaf answered. "Useful, yes. They saved humanity and gave us the stars, but for their own reasons."

In order to study intelligent life. Talk about complexity and something that can't be studied properly in a lab! Or with a computer model! So many variables! So many surprises! You are better than the weather!

She was reaching the end of her strength. This talking had to stop. She needed to sit in the afternoon sunlight and watch clouds moving above the rift. Olaf must have sensed this and stood.

"The pseudo-apes are being tested for intelligence. We expect them to meet the criteria of people. Then we will ask them what they want. Our preference would be to integrate them into our society. We think we can modify them so they'll be able to bear children—not humans, but members of their own species. Miranda Schmidt had first class equipment, but her training was two centuries out of date. Our people are certain they can do better. Think of the tourist attraction the apes will be! A brand new intelligent species!"

"How did she do it?" Lydia asked dreamily. "Modify them? They are so big."

"The way one might expect," Olaf said. "Shot the mother apes with tranquilizer darts, stole their babies, injected them with tailored viruses and raised them. She had no help in the first generation; and it must have been hell! The process of transformation took three generations. Surely you noticed the older apes looked more ape-like?"

The grizzled woman with beetling brows and sad, intelligent, dark eyes.

"Only the last generation is completely sterile. But they are the ones of age to reproduce, so they must be modified, if we're going to have more of these new people.

"What you need to do, Lydia, is convince Stellar Harvest to turn this entire adventure into a holo. Though I can't imagine who will play you. Nadine could be portrayed by Ramona Patel; and I want Cy Melbourne for me; the pseudo-apes can be played by themselves."

"Get out," said Lydia.

He laughed and left. She dozed in the afternoon warmth till Nadine arrived.

Was this place a rail station? Couldn't people leave her alone?

"I'm staying here till Father's trial is over," Nadine said. "I know he shouldn't have helped Dr. Schmidt. But the starmen and starwomen feel a loyalty to one another we cannot understand."

She wanted to tell Nadine how uninterested she was, but that might cause an argument, and she didn't have the energy. Lydia listened, while Nadine tried to explain why Benjamin Hani had helped the crazy doctor for years. Her interest in Nadine had vanished, in spite of the woman's wolflike beauty, her long legs and artificial eyes. Lydia wasn't certain why. The pain that made her sentimental had apparently made her unromantic. And Nadine obviously had problems with her father, which she had not yet resolved: anger at being abandoned; discomfort in having an out of date progenitor; competition; love. The words drifted through Lydia's mind like clouds, tinted gold by the opiate. Never get between a child and its parent.

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Is this so?

Yes.

We do not bond. I feel nothing for the factory that produced me. The AI sounded wistful.

At that point, with Nadine still talking, Lydia fell asleep.

Half a standard year later, Lydia received a message from Olaf Reykjavik. She was on vacation, after having spent all too much time in an AI maintenance station. The planet she had picked (Tchoon) was cold, dry and arid, except around the equator, where forests of gigantic trees grew around a series of shallow oceans. The Atch lived there, a slim and elegant people, their skins covered with complex patterns in shades of green. Lydia's assignment, from the maintenance station and human doctors, was to relax and get to know her new self. Sitting in a beach chair at the edge of a narrow sea, she turned on Olaf's message.

Benjamin Hani had received a suspended sentence on the condition that he leave Tchel and never return. The other criminals, the clone children, would be rehabilitated, if possible. They had been born on Tchel and thus were citizens.

"Not the ideal solution," Olaf said. "Hani is a fool and may be dangerous some time in the future. But his record will follow him; and other governments will watch him; and we wanted to be rid of him. The children will give us as many problems as we need.

"Nadine has returned to her storm. What did you call it? The Rose? And I have returned to the rift. My party was voted out of office at the last election; I'm back at my old job as a guide.

"The issue of nature as opposed to nurture has not been solved by our adventure. The children's behavior can be explained by the fact that they're the clones of old-time bosses or by the fact that Dr. Schmidt raised them to be arrogant assholes.

"In the same fashion, the parents' sweetness may be genetic or it may come from their raising.

"My own opinion is the children are assholes, because they were raised to be assholes; and the parents are sweet by nature. They are full citizens now—the parents, not the children; and I have three working for me: Pig, Thunder, and Vagina Dentata. When I'm done training them, they will be absolutely first class guides.

"When are you coming back to Tchel? And when is Stellar Harvest coming to make a holo? Love, Olaf." O

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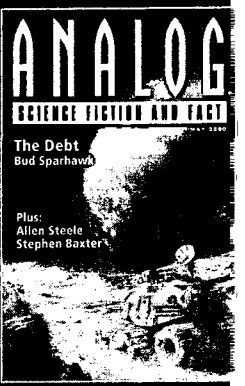

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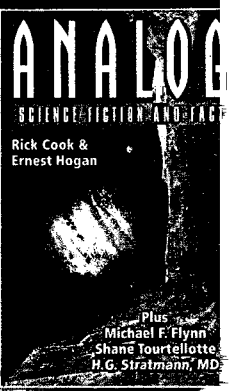

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CHAIN OF LIFE

Steven Utley

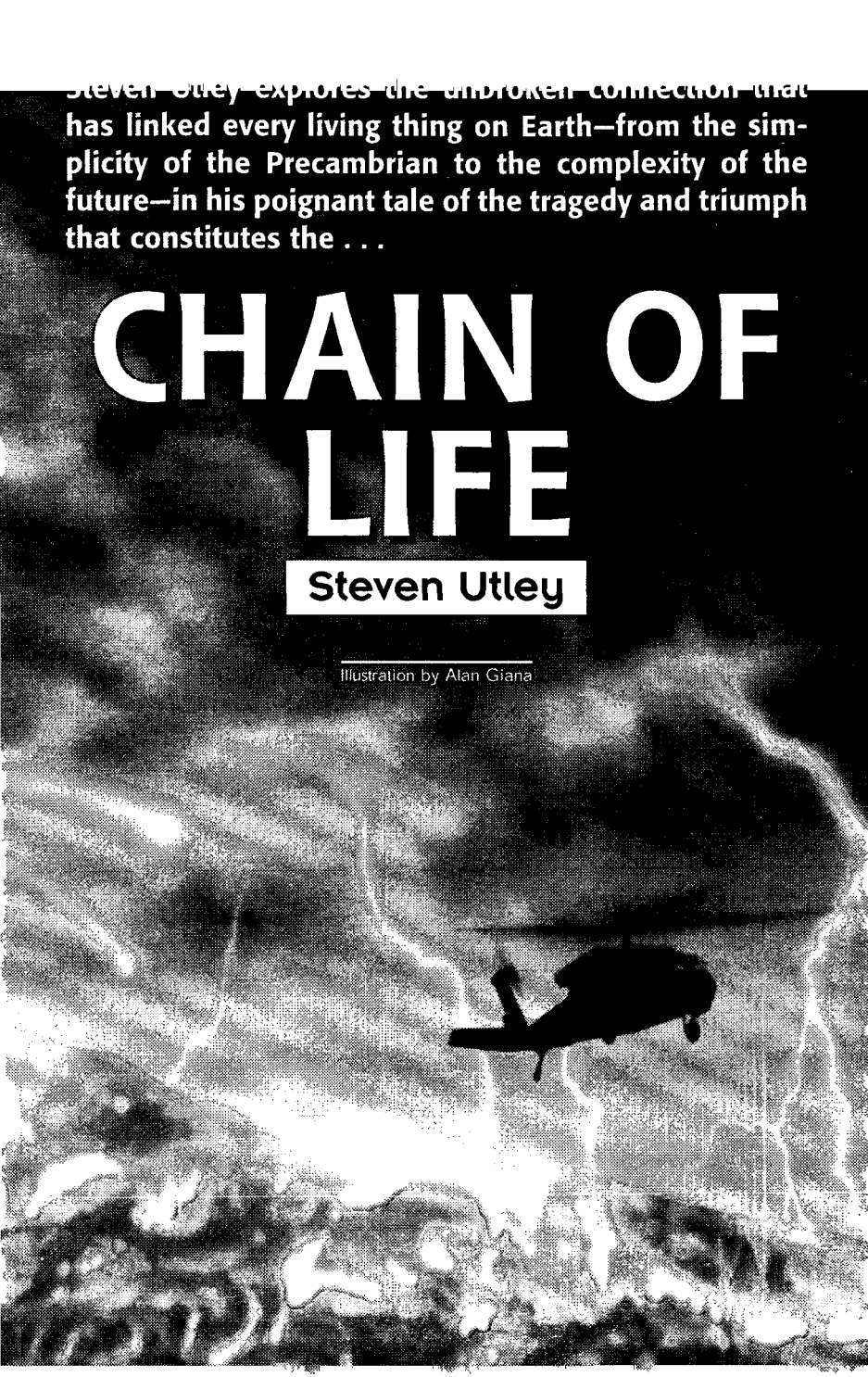

Illustration by Alan Giana

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The helicopter flew low over a moon-gray landscape. The island was a succession of barren knife-edge promontories rising steeply from the blue-black waters of the Iaepetus Ocean to converge on a point inland. Streams flowed swiftly between the ridges, emptying into marshy borders. Seated precariously behind Dixon and the pilot, L.V.—not so much in the machine as upon it—French let his gaze travel along the curve of a black ridge toward the volcano's summit. The volcano itself looked like a high rugged hill with a crown of thin gray cloud.

He saw Dixon give L.V. a gentle nudge and point down at a flat spur of rock at the rim of the crater. Shouting to make himself heard above the whir of the blades, Dixon said, "Set her down there, I want to take a look."

French glanced downward between the landing skids and felt a sharp pang of uneasiness. The spur formed a platform no wider, it seemed to him, than a sidewalk. Dixon was a solid barrel-chested man who looked as though he should weigh more than the skeletal helicopter could lift, as though, in fact, he might weigh more than the helicopter itself; French and L.V. were only relatively more compactly built, and the pilot constantly had to compensate. Moreover, though the two volcanologists had approached the crater's rim before to collect ash samples and French knew the composition of its crusted surface—pulverized mountain, mostly, leavened with new, glassy ash—in spite of himself, he imagined the skids breaking through, sinking, the lip of the crater crumbling beneath the combined weight of men and machine, tipping sundry and all into the volcano. L.V. positioned the helicopter over the spur and descended to within a hand's span of the surface. Dixon unstrapped himself, stepped off, and looked expectantly at French, who thought, Dammit, goddammit, and unbuckled his own seat belt. His uneasiness flared almost into fright as his feet crunched through the surface. He sank, however, only to his ankles in the gritty stuff and easily pulled free. It was no worse than walking in coarse sand.

Dixon leaned toward L.V. and shouted, "Come on, put her down, take a look with us."

L.V. shook his head and shouted back at him, "I better wait here for you."

"Chance of a lifetime."

L.V. shook his head again, more emphatically. "Against the rules."

"Don't be a pussy."

The pilot's face hardened into an unhappy mask. Dixon shrugged and grinned, but there was a sneer tucked into the corner of the grin. Then he gave French a hearty slap on the shoulder and motioned for him to follow.

They crept to the brink of a chasm at least thirty meters wide. French heard the hiss of escaping gas and a cacophony of grinding and popping as rocks cracked and split apart in the intense heat. His skin prickled, and he blinked constantly to keep his eyeballs moist, but through a bright vaporous shimmer he made out a huge jumble of volcanic debris that he at first took to be the opposite wall of the crater, then recognized as the bulge of the lava dome. He cautiously leaned forward to peer over the edge, into the abyss, down a rough wall that looked perfectly perpendicular. He could see for about forty meters, but the bottom was obscured. Okay, he thought, looking at Dixon, we've stuck our heads into the lion's mouth, let's get out of here. Dixon seemed to have noticed French's discomfiture, though, and made a point of taking his time.

Finally, they did fly back down the mountain, back to the camp. As they made their approach for landing, French saw the other member of the geol-

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ogy team waiting below. Toombs ran forward, ducking under the whirling blades, and shouted to Dixon, "Another tremor just now, while you were airborne." He did not wait for Dixon to unbuckle his seat belt but unfolded a long sheet of computer printout across his lap and ran a finger down a column of data. While L.V. worked around them to secure the helicopter, Dixon and French studied the print for some minutes.

Dixon pursed his lips thoughtfully and looked at Toombs. "Didn't knock any of our laser targets out of alignment, I hope."

Toombs' face split in a toothy grin. "Naw. But the pulse is picking up."

French said, "I think the suspense is pretty much over."

Dixon nodded. "We've done all we can do here. I think it's time to get everybody the hell out. I'm giving the order. Let's get 'em all together."

As they walked toward the small camp, de Souza emerged from her tent. Dixon called to her to assemble the other three members of the biology team, Bearden, Gentry, and Pope. French exchanged smiles with Carol Bearden as she strolled up. They had met at the main camp two months earlier, when the Caledonian Land Survey Group was being organized; they now shared a tent, an arrangement that raised eyebrows among neither the biologists nor the geologists. She said, "We had another quake just now."

"So I understand."

Dixon said, "Well, friends and neighbors," and pointed, and every face turned toward the mountain, which at the moment sported a wispy plume, "the big firework show's about due to begin."

"How soon, you think?" said de Souza.

"Damn soon. First rule of the profession is, never bet the farm on predictions of exactly what a volcano's going to do or when it's going to do it. But we knew from seismic data three months ago there was going to be an eruption here. Now we've got two months' worth of data collected on-site that tells us it's definitely coming within the month, maybe within the next week or two."

"Cutting it kind of fine, aren't you?"

Toombs nodded. "It could even happen within the next couple or three days."

"How definite is that *probably,* Dix?"

Dixon scratched his grizzled jaw and said, "It's a pretty damn foregone definite probably."

"Ah, hell," said Gentry. "Are you sure?"

Dixon gave him a good-natured sort of exasperated look and said, "Do we ask you if you're sure about your bugs? You know we've worked our butts off installing instruments all around the crater." He began to count off on his fingers as he talked. "We got geodimeters and stream gauges. We got seismometers to measure movement under the volcano. We got gravity meters to measure vertical swellings. We got tiltmeters and laser targets to detect bulging in the mountainside—and every damn toy we got is linked by remote-controlled telemetry units to computer, so we can process the data quickly. The face of the mountain's swelling laterally at the rate of two meters a day. The instruments we took to analyze escaping gases show a big increase in sulfur dioxide content. High sulfur dioxide content tells us there's juvenile magma rising toward the surface. Infrared aerial photos show hot spots in the crater and on the flanks. We're getting those small-magnitude quakes at the rate of more than a dozen per hour." He put his fists on his hips and surveyed his colleagues with a mock-belligerent ex-

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pression on his face. "And if you won't take our gizmos' word for it, we just now landed on the rim of the crater to see for ourselves. The kettle's definitely on the boil."

French saw the expression on Carol Bearden's face when Dixon mentioned the excursion on the crater's rim, and he thought, Uh oh. Dixon saw it, too, and just grinned at her, and French thought, again, Uh oh. He knew that it only infuriated her more when Dixon just grinned at her. Dixon looked around at the group. "So. The bang's going to happen, and soon, and it's time for you folks to get the hell out of here."

"But," said Gentry, "I'm just not *finished* here." He appealed to de Souza. The sympathetic expression on her broad face became more so as he said, "Every day, I discover a new arachnid species."

De Souza unfolded her arms and extended a brown hand to touch Gentry's sleeve. "John," she said, "we knew from the first we'd end up clearing off this island in a hurry."

"But yesterday I identified a new species of spider. It's the size of a flea."

She started to speak again, but Dixon beat her to it. "John," he said, "we're all proud for you. But the bulging's on the flank facing us, and the next big seismic shock ought to make it go. When all that fractured rock does go, the blast'll almost certainly be nozzled horizontally, in our direction. Even if it's nozzled vertically, we're expecting a dirty blast. Our surveys of the thick pyroclastic deposits here tell us past eruptions've been extremely violent. Even if it's only a moderately dirty blast, with the prevailing winds, the ash cloud'll smother this whole end of the island. And there go your spiders the size of fleas. And everything else, too. We're talking about a blast that probably kills everything on and around this island. We have a plan for evacuation, and I say it's in effect as of this moment. The Navy's been standing by, and they'll be here tomorrow expecting you to be ready to be flown out. So you need to get everything packed and stacked."

Gentry and Pope turned to de Souza as though she alone could rescind Dixon's order and make the volcano behave. She smiled at them and shook her head. "Dix has the say-so when it comes to the volcano. The word is, packed and stacked." She flashed a look at Dixon. To Gentry and Pope she said, "Sorry, boys. Even if I knew enough to disagree with Dix, I know better than to argue with him."

She walked away trailing two distinctly unhappy-looking biologists. The third unhappy-looking biologist started to follow, then turned suddenly, folded her arms, and glared at French and Dixon. "Landed on the rim of the crater?" she said. "Whose brilliant idea was that? As if I really needed to ask."

French was sheepish, but Dixon put a huge happy expression on his face. "Carol honey," he said, "the only place to land near the crater was practically right in the crater."

"Don't you ever call me that again. And you don't have to look as though you live for landings on active volcanoes."

Dixon seemed to reflect for a moment. Then he said, "Perhaps I do live for it," and his happy expression became more so. "Volcanology *is* all about fire-spitting mountains. This *is* what a volcanologist lives for. To peek down Vulcan's chimney. I tell you, some people think the Silurian's dull, but that's just because it's not all full of obvious melodrama."

"Dix," Carol said, "some of us prefer it not to be all full of obvious melodrama."

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"Ah, but sometimes you can't avoid melodrama."

"Do you even *try* to avoid it?"

"Why would I do that? Laurentia and Eurasia are colliding. This end of the Iaepetus is closing, mountains're getting built. But it's all in fits and starts and in slow motion. It takes millions of years. The Silurian ends, the Devonian begins. Or maybe the Silurian's already ended, and the Devonian's begun. The segue's so gradual nobody can agree exactly where the boundary is. But one thing I do know, on this island, we're standing right at the point of contact—right on the leading edge of Laurentia as it slams into Eurasia."

She looked expectantly at French.

Say something, idiot, he told himself, *anything*—

She made a disgusted sound, wheeled, and stalked away.

"I'm sure going to be catching hell for this for a while," French said ruefully. "Maybe for quite a while."

"Female disapproval," said Dixon, "is one of the things I came to the Paleozoic to avoid. If I can't avoid it, I try to ignore it."

"There are compensations."

"Woman like that," Dixon said, "wants it all. Career, marriage, family, your balls."

French exhaled sharply. "Look," he said, "I'll be back directly and give you a hand, okay?"

Dixon waved him away. "Go on. Rush to your doom."

French found Carol sitting on a camp stool in their tent, sorting through a miscellany of papers. She barely glanced at him.

He said, "Well, it doesn't take a genius to tell you're pissed off. I'm sorry."

"I noticed you let Dix do all the talking back there."

"Dix is—"

She threw up her hands and stood. "Christ, Mike! Dix is just not the person I'm really mad at here. Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

"No." He could feel heat starting to creep up his neck. "Of course not."

"Then it must just've been a testosterone surge. I don't like this macho crap. I'm not going to tell you how to do your job, but please answer me one question absolutely truthfully. Does actually sticking your head into a live volcano tell you anything you couldn't learn from checking your instruments?"

He thought, If both of us lose our tempers here—He took a slow breath and said, "No. Not really."

Carol rolled her eyes, closed them, shook her head. "What if the volcano had all of a sudden erupted? No, wait, what'm I saying? The volcano wouldn't *dare* erupt while you were clomping around on it under the personal protection of the great man."

"We had the chopper."

"Can it outrun a pyroclastic blast?"

"Nope and neither could you," and French pointed through the open end of the tent, toward the distant volcano, "not even with this much of a head start. We're all taking a chance being here."

"That is not the point."

"Carol, I said I was sorry. I mean that. It was a stupid thing to do, and I knew at the time it was stupid. I don't want to fight with you." He sat down on his cot, knitted his fingers, clutched his hands between his knees. "Not when you're right."

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She sat down on the camp stool and regarded him. "I know there're hazards in your work. If you got killed in the line of duty, I'd grieve, I'd be heartbroken, but I'd tell myself you got killed doing your job. But if you got killed trying to prove you're as much of a man as Dix is—I already *know* how much of a man you are."

"Look. You're going all the way back to the base camp, and I'm going to be out here at least until the volcano does decide to erupt. I don't want you to be mad at me the whole time we're separated. I want you to—"

"Want me to what?"

"I want you to miss me as much as I'm going to miss you."

"I am going to miss you—terribly. You've just got to promise me you won't let Dix shame you into joining him in any more stupid stunts."

He felt his neck grow warm again, felt his face redden. "He didn't shame me."

"Of course he did. Dix is the person your mother was warning you about when she asked you if everybody jumped off a cliff, would you do it too. I know how Dix operates because my dad was exactly like him. Be a man, he was always telling my brother. Don't be a spineless little faggot. Live dangerously, impress the girls. That advice put my brother in a wheelchair for keeps."

"Dix's just excited about his work."

"Dix is demented about his work."

He moved closer to her, extended a hand to stroke her hair and cup her cheek; after a moment, she moved her head slightly and kissed the heel of his hand. "He's *excited,*" he said. "And *I'm* excited. As excited as you are about finding out if your, your whatsits, your wiggly things—"

"Cosmopolitan Silurian faunas."

"—are already turning into crawly things."

"Giving way to slightly more isolated and parochial Devonian faunas." She smiled, finally. "I'm excited. I'm not out of my mind. I'm not taking needless risks to prove I'm a man."

He ran a hand down her back, slipped it around her side, touched the side of her breast. "Not even needless risks could prove that. So, okay, Dix is *over*excited about his work."

"Dix is your id, Mike." She made a moue. He moved his hand slightly. "But to hell with him. Close that tent flap. Let's get excited about something else."

Later, as they lay fitted together like spoons on the cot, she murmured, "I can't say I won't always have wonderful memories of this island."

"If it doesn't blow itself to atoms, maybe it eventually piles up against Scotland or Ireland. We could come back and visit it sometime. Back in the twenty-first century. You know. A vacation. Or a honeymoon."

She did not reply until several seconds had passed, during which his fingers, tucked lightly into her armpit, felt the beating of her heart and he heard the throb of blood in his own ears. Then: "Why would I ever marry a man who'd fly into a volcano?"

He nuzzled the back of her neck. "Maybe to keep him from hurting himself?"

French spent the afternoon running a detailed instrument check with Dixon and Toombs while L.V. serviced his helicopter and everyone else pulled up stakes, pulled down tents, and packed gear. It was almost dark when they had finished.

That night, French awoke suddenly to the smell of partially digested food.

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He sat up on his cot and looked around. The tent flap was open, and somebody was standing just outside, making retching noises. He got his flashlight and played the beam over the cot opposite his. It was empty. He called softly, "Carol?"

He found his entrenching tool and leaned out of the tent. She stood illumined by moonlight, with the back of her hand pressed against her mouth.

"I woke up nauseous," she said. "I barely made it out of the tent in time."

"Where is it?"

She took the entrenching tool from him. "It's my mess, I'll clean it up. Go back to sleep."

"Are you okay? Do you feel—?"

"Camp cooking always upsets my stomach."

"We eat camp cooking two, three times a day."

"And it always upsets my stomach. Go back to bed. I'll be back as soon—soon."

"Anything I can do in the meantime?"

"You can stop fretting over me."

"Sorry."

The first thing he did when he awoke the following morning was shake out his boots. Thus far during his sojourn in the Paleozoic, however, no venomous invertebrates, nor even any nonvenomous ones, had ever tumbled out. That was fine by him.

He thrust his legs into canvas shorts and his sock-clad feet into the boots. Carol lay on the other cot in skivvies with an arm thrown over her face; he bent over her and gently stroked her forearm with a fingertip. She groaned suddenly, opened her eyes, reclosed them, groaned again. She said, "I feel awful. Airsick."

"You haven't left the ground yet."

"It's the thought I'm going to." She sat up and swung her feet to the ground and put her head in her hands. She said, "Christ." She reached out and took his hand and gave him a wan smile. "Go on and get yourself some breakfast. You know where to look for me."

After he had eaten, he found her squatting on the rocky verge of the marsh. It had been part of her morning ritual, every day at sunrise, to reconnoiter the border of what she called The Plant Kingdom. There was nothing very imposing about its inhabitants. There were creeping green tendrils, some with forked aerial stems, some topped with round sporangia. Some of the tendrils were as thick as pencils, others seemed little more substantial than spider web. None had leaves. None had roots; their purchase on the ground was tenuous. All reached more or less upward, but none possessed the vascular rigidity to stand very tall; none came as high as his knee. There was nothing very orderly about them, either: they lay inextricably entwined with one another upon the mushy ground. At first, they had looked to him not so much like plants as a matted litter of twigs and small round unidentifiable bits of plant debris. He had known nothing of botany, but Carol had taught him the names of the various genera. He knew *Psilophyton, Protolepidodendron, Sciadophyton, Drepanophycus.*

He stood a short distance from her now, and after a minute or so he said, "Hi. Feeling better?"

She had glanced back over her shoulder at him when she heard him coming, then down again at The Plant Kingdom. The marsh, which was cut into a monotonous quilt of greens, grays, and browns by narrow algae-choked

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waterways, seemed motionless. A patient observer, however, would have eventually noticed small crawling arthropods close by. Occasionally, a scorpion crawled through the miniature forest. There was a smell of decomposition; lying in a muddy puddle amid the plants was a fish part—an eyeless bony head about the size of a silver dollar. Insects and other arthropods swarmed over it. Finally, she said, "They're trying to make soil."

French stepped closer to her, thrust his hands into his pockets, rocked gently on his heels, said nothing.

She looked out over the marsh. "Well," she went on, "if it wasn't the volcano, the next flood would've washed most of it away, and flattened most of the plants as well. And even that little river flows into an ocean that's being squeezed out of existence. Life's coming ashore, against terrific odds. I know that in the long run, soil will cling to the earth. But I grieve for my miniature forest anyway. The organisms on this island are going to die without issue and won't even get to turn into fossils. Except for the anomaly that let us come here, nobody'd know they ever existed. These rhyniophytes are brave little things. I love them for their simplicity and ambition, their fragility and determination. There's this long unbroken chain of life stretching from each and every one of us—from every living thing on earth—all the way back to our most distant Precambrian ancestor. Every link in that chain's an organism that struggled to get us where we are. Here on this island, all that effort's meant nothing."

"Maybe not. Otherwise, why would de Souza want to come back here right after the eruption to check for signs of regeneration?"

"Rene's more optimistic than I am."

"But it is just barely possible some small animals might survive if they were in mud or underwater when the blast reaches here. And there's a plant that can start growing like a week or two after an eruption. Fireweed."

"We're a long, long time from fireweed. None of these plants is nearly that tough. It's all they can do to keep from drying out in air."

"Honey," French said, touching her shoulder, "I'm sorry."

It was mid-morning when the big Navy cargo helicopter came in low over the sea. It circled the camp once and positioned itself above a relatively level patch of rock on which the scientists had marked a long white stripe intersected at a right angle by a shorter white stripe. The helicopter settled to earth, the engine noise died in a whine, and two bluejackets got out and immediately began helping the scientists load equipment. It was a well-organized evacuation and did not take long. The plan was for L.V. to fly Dixon and French in his small helicopter to a rocky islet located at a theoretically safe distance from the volcano, where a field station had already been established. Toombs and other geologists would observe the eruption from positions along the loaf-shaped mainland of Caledonian Land. After they had observed the eruption, the Navy would collect them and return them to the main base, far to the southwest.

As Toombs and the biology team prepared to board the big helicopter, Dixon said, "Well, folks, we'll see you back in Stinktown."

Carol Bearden approached and handed French a book. "In case you get bored on your little desert island," she said.

French turned it over in his hands, read the spine, made a quizzical face. "Jane Austen?"

"It's a comedy of manners. It may have a morally uplifting effect on Dix if you read it to him."

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"Carol honey," said Dixon, as French stuffed the book into a pocket, "I appreciate the thought. But—bored? Here? Now?" He grinned and made an expansive gesture. "We are in the last moments, geologically speaking, of pre-Pangean time! Continents are plunging recklessly at one another at the breakneck speed of a few centimeters per year!"

"Geology is not a contact sport." She gave French a quick kiss. "Take care of yourself. Don't do anything stupid. I mean it." She gave Dixon a warning look. "Dix, if you get him hurt or killed, you'd damn well better die with him."

Dixon flashed her a big grin. "You know, you're beautiful when you're making death-threats."

French did not like flying over open water, but L.V. got him and Dixon to the islet without incident. The islet was a barren, sheer-sided, flat-topped volcanic plug pounded by plunging breakers. L.V. covered the helicopter with a tarpaulin while the two volcanologists unpacked instruments and made a radio check. Then they settled down to wait for the volcano to erupt.

"We may be back home in another month," Dixon said over their simple evening meal.

L.V. smiled; it was almost a dreamy smile. "I can't wait to see my wife and kids again."

"You know," Dixon said, "The more I think about going back and arguing about the data and writing the papers—and fighting for more damn funding—" He snorted contemptuously. "This is supposed to be my last visit to the Paleozoic. They tell me I'm too old and fragile to do any more time-traveling."

"What about you?" French asked L.V. "Think you'll come back?"

The pilot shrugged. "If I can."

"Whaddya mean, if?" said Dixon. "You could almost start your own charter service here."

"Okay, make that, as soon as I can."

Dixon speculatively eyed the tarpaulin-draped form of the helicopter. "When it's time to go," he said to L.V., "I hate the thought of you having to disassemble that thing. I'm glad you showed me how to handle it. I wonder if Captain Kelly'd change his mind about letting me try a deck landing."

"Navy's real particular," L.V. said deliberately, "about who crashes on its ships."

"How much damage could a bicycle with a fan on it do?"

French folded his arms across his chest. "Well, I won't be in any hurry, but I would like to come back some day. Organize a trip out that way," and he nodded toward the unbroken horizon. "Maybe if I play up the regional angle."

"What do you mean?"

"Out on Laurentia's trailing edge, California, the mountain ranges, they don't exist yet. My home state, Nevada, right now it's all oceanfront property. Back home, we puzzle over a few areas that have folding and warping. We know, because there're no pre-Silurian arc-derived volcanic components in western assemblage oceanic rocks, that there just isn't any major tectonicism in the Great Basin during the time span from the erosion of the Prepaleozoic highlands until the Late Devonian. There're just those few intriguing wrinkles in Siluro-Devonian deep-water rocks in Nevada. So what produced the wrinkles? It's mysterious, tantalizing. The answer's out there—" again he nodded toward the horizon "—somewhere far off."

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"Probably," Dixon said, "it's sea-floor plate sliding under the edge of the continental plate. Sea-floor plate melts, light-weight molten components're forced upward through the overlying oceanic plate, back to the surface—maybe creating an offshore arc of volcanic islands."

"There wouldn't necessarily have to be active volcanism," French said. "There doesn't have to be an arc. It could be a continental fragment, drifting toward North America. Those deep-water western assemblage clastics may just've been eroded off the fragment, into the oceanic basin between it and Laurentia."

"Mm. Could be. The siliceous sediments would have—"

"The point I'm trying to make is, I wish we had the resources to find out if there is a landmass out that way. If they'd spend a little extra money on the next photo-satellite they send up, maybe it'll stay in orbit long enough for us to get some good out of it."

Dixon grunted assent. "Me, I'd like to go take a look around in the southern hemisphere. Have to bring my own ship, though. Navy's already pitching fits about running back and forth between Stinktown and here. I'll get to visit Gondwanaland the day after you get your satellite. That'll be the day after the astronomers get that big multi-billion-dollar radio telescope array they're always going on about." They laughed.

L.V. said, "Can't you guys ever talk about anything except geology? Here we got a swell moon lighting up a great unknown sea, and—" He produced a silver flask from his pocket and unscrewed the cap.

"Speaks to the romantic in me," Dixon said, holding out his tin cup.

L.V. poured everyone a drink, then a second one for Dixon and himself. French declined. "Think I'll be turning in." He stood up and stretched. "'S been a long day."

The flask made a liquid sound as L.V. shook it. "Sure you don't want a nightcap?"

"Leave him alone," Dixon said. "Only one thing speaks to the romantic in him. He's crazy about a cute biologist. Right, Mike?"

"Cut it out," French said, frowning. He was looking down at Dixon, who was grinning up at him; tucked into the corner of the grin was the sneer.

"I guess I see why," Dixon went on, "although that de Souza's more to my taste. A healthy strapping handsome woman, and a model of forbearance."

"A what?" said L.V.

"The sort of woman who'd let a man have his own way for twenty, even thirty years before she up and stuck a knife in him."

"Oh," said L.V. "That sounds like my old lady."

French crawled into his sleeping bag but did not fall asleep immediately. Lying alone after having been with Carol for so long felt strange.

He had first seen her collecting soil specimens at the base camp, colloquially known as Stinktown. He had come up behind her unexpectedly, she had seen him a second or two after he had seen her; her face seemed to lengthen as her eyes widened and her mouth opened; she gave a soft yelp and made a little sideward hop.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I didn't mean to startle you," at the same moment she said, "*Don't* be sneaking up on people like that!"

"I'm really sorry," he told her. "I wasn't trying to sneak up on you. I was looking around up there—" he pointed up the slope, toward a clutter of crumbling boulders "—and when I came out from behind that big rock, here you were."

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She studied him suspiciously. "Gabbert's in charge up there, and he doesn't like anyone nosing around." She gestured at the marsh. "And please don't be tromping around out here."

"No one told me so much of the Paleozoic's off limits."

"The astronomers've claimed the ridgetop for themselves, and they're very particular about their equipment. And this marsh is a fragile ecosystem. We don't want people trampling it underfoot." She evidently did not like the sound of that even as she said it, for she softened her tone of voice. "We ask everyone to please stay on the rocks."

"No one asked or told me anything. I just made the jump two days ago. My name's Mike French. I'm a volcanologist."

"Carol Bearden. Biologist. I'm pleased to meet you."

He indicated the specimen case and then a line of small, regularly spaced excavations along the edge of the marsh. "May I ask what you're collecting?"

"Soil samples for the tullgren funnel."

"The what?"

"It's a device for extracting small invertebrate animals from dry soil samples. Then I collect 'em and count 'em and try to figure out what they are."

With the toe of his boot, he nudged the rim of the closest excavation. "Why, it's hardly soil at all."

She picked up a pinch of humus. "It's the primordial humus. The prototype of soil."

"Everything here's a prototype of something. Everything's so primitive."

"I prefer to accept everything here for its own self. I seldom use the word 'primitive.' This pinch of dirt is as exciting to me as trilobites and bony fish and plate tectonics. Humus. Magical, amazing stuff. Every molecule in this little bit I'm holding is subtly different from every other molecule. It's molecular chaos."

"I am sure it's important work, but it seems so—I'm not sure what to call it."

"Trivial? Here we are, at the dawn of time, and I'm counting bugs in clods of dirt?"

"I don't mean to sound disparaging. It just seems like such an everyday line of research."

"Uh huh. Let me tell you about my everyday line of research back home. I did some disinterments. To study the organisms that set up shop in buried bodies. Including human bodies. Bodies become teeming nests. Larvae of beetles and flies, worms, mites, thysanura, fungi. Result—rich soil and free air."

If she had expected him to blanch, he disappointed her.

"I want to die here," she went on. "At least, when I'm dead, I want to be buried here in this marsh, in Silurian soil. Then, after a while, I want my colleagues to disinter me and see what kinds of organisms've taken up lodging in my corpse."

Oh-kay, he thought. "You'd probably have to take a research proposal like that all the way to the National Science Foundation. So –" he spoke pleasantly but without tremendous obvious conviction "—it isn't just about counting bugs in dirt clods."

"Of course it's not. I—" She looked at him sharply. "Am I boring you, or are you just making fun of me. Or both?"

"Neither."

"You're sure?"

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"Positive."

"Walk with me back to camp."

They walked together, but neither of them spoke again until they had reached the edge of the camp; then she pointed and said, "I go this way."

"It's been nice talking with you. I hope we can do it again sometime."

"Sometime soon."

"Yes. Well. Be seeing you."

They shook hands, and she turned and went her way. He wondered if she was not at least slightly miffed because he had not been that impressed with her line of research; he truly had not meant to insult her.

That afternoon, she had knocked on his tentpole and said, "Hi, remember me? Venus rising from the mud?"

He looked up from the papers before him, blinked, smiled at her. "Why, hello. To what do I owe the honor?"

"Would you like to go on a cheap date with me?"

He blinked at her again.

"Not a romantic date," she said. "Just a companionable, friendly kind of thing. Would you like to come stargazing with me this evening? On the heights above the camp? You've heard about that satellite they just sent up?"

"Yes, of course."

"It passes over every night. My tentmate went out to look at it a couple of nights ago. She says it's really bright up on the hill, away from the camp lights."

"I'd love to see it. What time?"

"After sunset, before midnight. Don't ask me to tell you when it is on the military clock."

He asked, "Shall I call for you at your tent?"

"Why not meet me right after sunset in front of the mess tent?"

"I look forward to it."

"Me, too. Well. Till then."

"Till then."

She backed out of the tent and hurried away. French's head was fairly spinning. Aiee, he thought.

That evening, however, he had felt calm and collected. He and Carol Bearden simply met as they had agreed to do and struck out for the stony slope behind the camp. Gabbert the astronomer, who was notorious, she explained, for his brittle humor, glared at them when they showed up; later, however, he pointed out the moving point of silvery light, and planets, too, and they were properly impressed. Then, after a while, they wandered back down to the camp, and one thing had led to another.

Now she came to him in a dream, came gliding toward him across the rocky moonlit terrain as smoothly as though she were walking on a polished ballroom floor. She wore an evening gown that somehow did not seem out of place, and her close-cropped hair had unaccountably become a cornsilk-colored cascade about her shoulders. She said his name, softly, a faraway sound. . . .

"Mike!" The sound was neither soft nor far away. It was loud and right in his ear. French found himself looking at Dixon. "Wake up!"

Dixon drew back as French sat up. The sun barely showed above the horizon. "Sorry—overslept—"

"No, Mike!"

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"What? What is it?"

"A five-oh quake! If that doesn't touch off the powder keg—get up! Get up!"

Dixon jumped away. French kicked his sleeping bag off his feet and began scurrying from instrument to instrument. He heard Dixon babbling into the radiophone, "It's going! God *damn!* It's going! This is it!" Then a sound like an artillery barrage came across the sea, drowned out the roar of the breakers below, drowned out Dixon, froze French in place, one hand eternally reaching for but never touching a dial. After what felt to French like an immensely long time, he managed to turn his face toward the source of the sound. Far out on the sea, a vast purple cloud rose into the sky, rose and kept rising—so vast a cloud that, even at that distance, it seemed alive with static electricity. The cloud spread across the sky, eating the light. Within an hour, ash began to fall lightly upon the islet.

"I'd better go check the tarp on the copter," L.V. said. Just then, lightning illuminated the overcast from end to end. Visibly awed, he said, "It brought its own weather."

"Yeah," said Dixon happily.

"Straight from hell, from the looks of it," said the pilot.

The following day, the air was clearer, and L.V. flew Dixon and French back over the island. Prior to the eruption French had not been particularly impressed by the volcano: now it was just an ugly gray hole in a landscape devastated beyond recognition. Framed by high ridges, a uniformly gray field of volcanic debris fanned out from the shattered side of the crater and down the slope to the edge of the sea. The edge of the triangle of destruction was as clearly defined as though it had been surveyed beforehand. There was no river any more. Large floating rafts of pumice choked the sea around the island.

After a week, the Navy helicopter arrived to take them away. By then, L.V.'s machine had been disassembled; the scientists and two bluejackets loaded it onto the big helicopter. Then everyone climbed aboard, the bluejackets closed the door after themselves, the helicopter rose. French sat between Dixon and L.V., and the bluejackets sat opposite French, one with folded arms and closed eyes and the look of somebody determined to catch a nap, the other with his full attention apparently riveted to the section of deck bracketed by his bootshod feet. L.V. stared out the small window. Dixon looked tired but immensely satisfied. The cabin was too full of noise for conversation. Adventure's end, French thought, and lapsed into an unrestful half-sleep.

When he got to Stinktown, he took his photographs of the blasted island and sought out Carol's tent. It was empty when he found it. He sat down on the cot to wait, and presently fatigue sucked him under as though into quicksand and he napped. He awoke to see her standing with crossed arms in the doorway of the tent; her expression was one of exquisite tenderness. He sat up and swung his feet off the cot, and she bent down and embraced and kissed him, then sat down beside him. She said, "God, I've missed you."

"Missed you, too," and after they had continued to embrace and kiss for a while he gently pulled away and handed her the photographs of the island. She studied them for more than a minute.

"Mother Earth," she said in a quiet voice, "has such a split personality. She provides for her children, then she murders them. There are so many potential mechanisms for death. Sea levels rise and fall. Climates change.

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Ocean chemistry changes. Volcanoes erupt. It's as though the Earth were trying to cleanse itself. As though life were an itch, and the planet has to scratch. Well." She handed the photographs back to him and compressed her mouth into a mirthless kind of smile. "Now that we're both thoroughly depressed, it's time for an abrupt change of subject."

"Uh oh."

"Uh oh is right. Mike, I'm pregnant."

"What?" Carol did not respond to that. The only thing he could think to say was, "But we use contraceptives."

"Accidents happen."

"I don't know if I'm ready for this."

"You think *I'm* ready for it?"

"What do you intend to do about it?"

She regarded him levelly. "I don't know. The question isn't what I'm going to do about this but what we're going to do about it. You and I. I love you, I want to marry you, and I want us to have a child—but under the circumstances—"

"Isn't there some regulation—"

"That's the Navy. I'm a civilian."

"But—"

"Navy policy is, no pregnant personnel can make the jump into the Silurian. Any officer or enlisted woman who becomes pregnant while in the Silurian is immediately sent home. I understand the reasoning. The jump's traumatic, it might induce miscarriages. But there's no policy for civilians."

"Well, what about abortion drugs?"

"If it was just a matter of taking a drug, I'd've done it already, but I've never had a fetus to abort before now, and I don't think it'd be the same as just blowing my nose. Mike, this is *our baby*. And don't tell me we can make more babies. This is ours."

"Carol," he said unhesitatingly, "you know I love you with all my heart. We belong together. So let's just go ahead and get married. We'll have a Paleozoic wedding, invite all our unsocialized colleagues. Maybe the Navy'll even let us walk under crossed swords. Then you can go back, and I'll come back as soon as I can."

Two great tears were suddenly rolling down her cheeks. "So I've just got the two choices, don't I? Abort and stay, go back and have the baby." She shook her head angrily. "I *can't* just pack up and go home. I've only been here a few months. It'd look bad on my résumé. I like my work here and I'm good at it."

Neither of them spoke for almost a minute. Then she said, "Well, look, I've had a little more time to think about this than you, and you can see how much progress I've made. It's not fair to ask you to make any decisions right away. But promise me you will think about it. Men don't get awards for bravery in intimacy—I can't remember who said that—but I now need you to be brave and intimate with me, Mike."

"I promise, Carol. We'll work something out."

She sniffed gratefully. "Now I have got to get some work done, and I bet you do, too."

"Nothing I can't put off for an hour."

"Well, I'm afraid I don't have that luxury. Meet me back here at dinnertime."

"It's a date, mate."

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His mood plummeted almost as soon as he had exited the tent, plummeted with such speed and to depths that he stood for a long moment marveling in a purely miserable way over the suddenness and the thoroughness of it. I am not afraid of committing to a relationship, he thought, I'm already committed, heart and soul. It's just, it's just—

He was not sure what it was just. He began to walk in the hope that it would help him get his thoughts in order. He found Dixon at the pier, standing before a cabinless daysailer with a blue hull. The crimson sail was furled. Dixon grinned and said, "I called in some favors with the head of the oceanographic group. I've the use of this sweetheart for the day."

French regarded the boat without understanding. Gradually, though, he managed to focus on it. Finally, he said, "They must've used up their team's whole weight allowance to get this through the hole."

"They took the same approach we did with the baby chopper. Got it classified as essential equipment. Hey, they said, we can't always be begging the Navy for one of its boats. Besides, it's non-polluting and low-maintenance." Dixon stepped down into the boat and motioned French to come aboard. "Nothing like a sail around the bay, and you have the look of someone who could stand to have a little fun right now."

"You do know how to work one of these things?"

"O'Neal took me out before we went off to Caledonian Land. Showed me how to tack and batten down the bosun and everything. It's not as hard to handle as L.V.'s baby chopper."

"Well . . ."

"Come *on,* Mike. Get your feet wet. Nobody's out on the water today, we got the sea to ourselves."

French stepped into the boat and sat down. Dixon tossed him a life jacket, then had him cast off a line and took the boat out onto the vast prehistoric sea. The wind was good, and the prow sliced the water cleanly, with a continuous hiss.

After a time, Dixon said, "You still look like you've got something on your mind."

French shrugged elaborately. He said, "Do you have any kids?"

"Not hardly. Too many people in the world already. Our world, I mean. I blame, in no particular order, the pope and the rest of humanity

"Carol's—I think Carol wants to have one."

Dixon fixed him with a solemn brown eye for a moment, then looked away. "So give her one. You're already stuck fast in the tar pit of love, so you might as well—"

"I don't think I'm ready for fatherhood."

"Who the hell ever is? Nobody I've ever talked to. Probably every living creature in Earth's history's felt the same way. What if I louse things up, so my spawn has to be an invertebrate all its life? What if it never learns to crawl out on land and can't find a decent ecological niche?"

They did not speak again but only sailed for several minutes. Then Dixon nodded toward the sea, the horizon. "Out that way there's probably nothing but an island arc or two until you get most of the way around the planet and start finding pieces of China."

French smiled fleetingly. "Maybe I'll find out some day."

"Some day! You aren't an ambitious enough thinker. I'm talking about us taking a little sailboat like this one out across that sea."

"You're nuts. It's a lot of sea for such a little boat."

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"How hard could it be? The trade winds always blow from the east. All I'd have to do is steer into the setting sun."

"For thousands and thousands of miles."

"Ah, but we'd do it for science." Dixon laughed. "Okay, now, when I say *hike,* we're going to lean backward over the windward rail to keep the boat from heeling."

The boat canted to leeward under the force of the wind in the sails. They hiked. The turn was sloppily executed, but it was executed. In spite of himself, French was exhilarated. Dixon asked "Want to do that again?" and French nodded, and they repeated the maneuver. They sailed thus for some time, cutting back and forth across the water.

Maybe this is the thing, French thought.

Then a sheet of spray drenched him, and he realized suddenly that the boat was bucking through the water. The wind had turned shifty, constantly changing in direction, and the waves, small and close together as they had sailed across the bay, were steep and choppy. He looked around at Dixon, whose mouth was set in a straight humorless line. He looked gray, seasick. French said, "Dix, aren't we out rather far?"

After a long moment, Dixon nodded vaguely and said, "Let's take her back in," and began the turn. The boat tipped to leeward, and the men hiked. The boat wallowed through a turn that still left the bow pointing at open sea. "Let's try it again."

The boat started to come around again.

French heard Dixon curse and looked around at him. He was clutching the line, but his expression was one of pure astonishment. He suddenly let go of the line, seemed to crumple, then toppled sideways into the water.

The boat wallowed, and the sail swung across, striking French on the chest. The life jacket cushioned the blow, but it nonetheless knocked the wind out of him and sent him tumbling backward over the side.

He found himself trying to fill his lungs with air and keep his head above the chop at the same time. His life jacket was gone; he had neglected to secure it when he put it on.

When he could breathe again, he called Dixon's name. There was no answer. He could not see the boat. His clothing began to weigh him down; he kicked off his shoes and slithered out of his shirt and trousers.

As he rose on a wave, he glimpsed land. He struck out toward it, sidestroking, conserving his strength, and as he swam he began to ransack his memory for everything he had ever observed or heard about the bay that would help him in the present situation. He knew that longshore currents must have sculpted the headlands that bracketed the bay, and that he would have to swim across the flow of water, which might carry him some distance down the coast before he reached the shore.

As he swam, he began to fantasize about strange monsters of the deep made all the stranger for being prehistoric. He did not panic—the biggest of the Silurian protosharks was still pretty small, and the real nightmares, the sea scorpions, mostly lived in brackish estuaries and ate worms—yet he felt or thought that he felt a long writhing body brush against his bare leg, and his imagination immediately populated itself with monsters as big as automobiles, with eyes on stalks and teeth like spikes, drawn by the novelty of a strange large warm creature splashing in the water, obviously in distress, obviously vulnerable.

He kept swimming, kept realigning himself with the glimmer of land.

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When he tired, he floated in the chop until his arms and legs ceased to ache; then he would begin pulling for the shore again.

A volcano couldn't blow me up, he thought. I'm not going to die just because I fell out of a goddamn boat. . . .

He was angry now. Angry at Fate, angry at Dixon, angriest of all at himself. Stupid, he thought. Stupid. Carol'll kill me.

His arms weighed tons, then hundreds of tons.

I can't make it, he thought. A roaring filled his head. I'm going to drown. I'm going to die and never see Carol again. The chain of life breaks here. Three billion years of evolution and it all stops here. Don't deserve to live. Stupid. Natural selection.

Unexpectedly, a wave rolled him over in the surf, pounded him against the sand. He dug his fingers in, but wave action sucked the earth out of his grip. Get up, he thought. Didn't come this far to drown in the surf.

He pulled himself forward, pushed himself up. The next wave tried to smash him down again. He crawled out of the sea as painfully as though he were the first creature in Earth's history to essay the trick, and then he lay gasping for a long time with foam swirling about his legs and his fingers clawing at the hard wet sand. When, finally, he could get to his feet, he staggered to the edge of the shingle, sat down, and faced the balked sea. A few arthropods worked the splash zone. Beat you again, he thought. We escaped you before. Escaped you again.

He must have lost consciousness then; he awoke to find himself in sick bay. A Navy doctor gave him a quick but thorough examination, and French asked about Dixon and was told that the man's body had been retrieved from the bay. Dixon had suffered a stroke, but that had not killed him; he had drowned after going into the water.

When he had finished examining French, the doctor let Carol come in and left the two of them alone. She kissed him gently on the mouth and asked, "How do you feel?"

"Like someone who's survived two unsympathetic natural phenomena."

"Sorry about Dix. I know I didn't approve of him. I'm sure he didn't approve of me. But I'm sorry."

"How about you and, you know?" He could tell nothing from her expression.

"Maybe—"

She hesitated long enough for him to have to ask, "What?"

"Maybe neither of us should go back."

He had to say it again: "What?"

"I have this crazy fantasy. About hiding the fact I'm pregnant until I'm so far along they don't dare send me through the hole. Then I'd have to have the baby here."

He stared at her with his mouth open. Then he nodded. "It's crazy, all right. The jump'd kill an infant."

"I know. So the baby and I *couldn't* go back. They'd *have* to let us stay. And you'd have to stay anyway. With Dix gone, someone's got to take over the survey—"

"This is no place for a baby!"

"Why not *make* it a place for one? It might even do the expedition some good—all the expeditions. Generate usefully sympathetic publicity whenever funding's threatened."

"What you're proposing's *impossible*."

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"I told you I want to die here and be buried here, and I meant it. And you told me I'd have to go all the way to the National Science Foundation with such a crazy idea. Well, okay, I'm *ready* to go all the way if I have to."

"Carol—"

"So far, humans've just been visitors here. But if I had the baby here, we'd be *colonists*. The first real colonists!"

She was serious, he could tell, absolutely serious and absolutely crazy, but he knew that he loved her absolutely as well, loved her with all his being and could not imagine life without her. Yet, though he was conscious of becoming resigned, he felt that he must make one final protest. "You know," he told her, "this is going to make just a whole lot of trouble for everybody. Especially us. Whatever you've got in mind to try, they're just going to call *you* a trouble-maker and a lunatic. *Me,* they're going to laugh at!"

"But what've we really got to lose by trying? Maybe we can't pull it off. But let's *try*. You never know—if nothing else, doesn't it at least appeal to your sense of the absurd?"

"Appeal is not the word for what it does to my sense of the absurd. You'd better tell me what you mean."

She laughed and held him to herself. "Imagine our baby's birth certificate!" O

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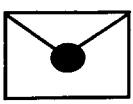

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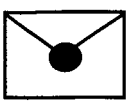

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THE MORNING AFTER

She awakens, feet swollen to small pumpkins.
Last night she crammed them inside slippers
so elegantly stiff her toes curled under
and clear blisters formed like tiny windows,
that opened to watch her dance atop daggers.

Despite agony, she could have stayed the night.
Alas, an early curfew forced an early exit!
Glass slivers clung dustlike to her sole when
she left for her true love a fragile memento,
a link, destined to bridge castle to hearth.

The morning after she is ugly as a stepsister,
eyes puffy from crying, nose red and dripping.
Rising from the ashes, her feet touch ground,
she winces, fully awakened by a stabbing fear:
She cannot prove who she was, or what she did.

Memories of his kisses fade like an old dream.
A regal prince will loathe a hobbled servant,
who soaks her common feet and consoles herself by
wishing that in fairy tales, as in the world,
fashion will conjure up the magic to save her.

—Leslie What

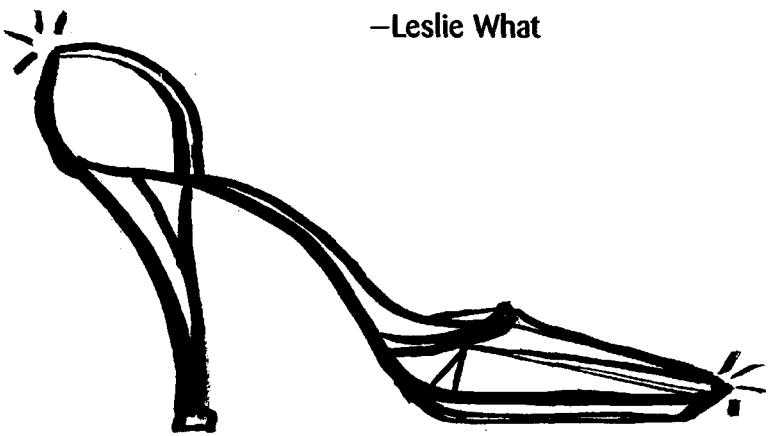

Illustration by June Levine

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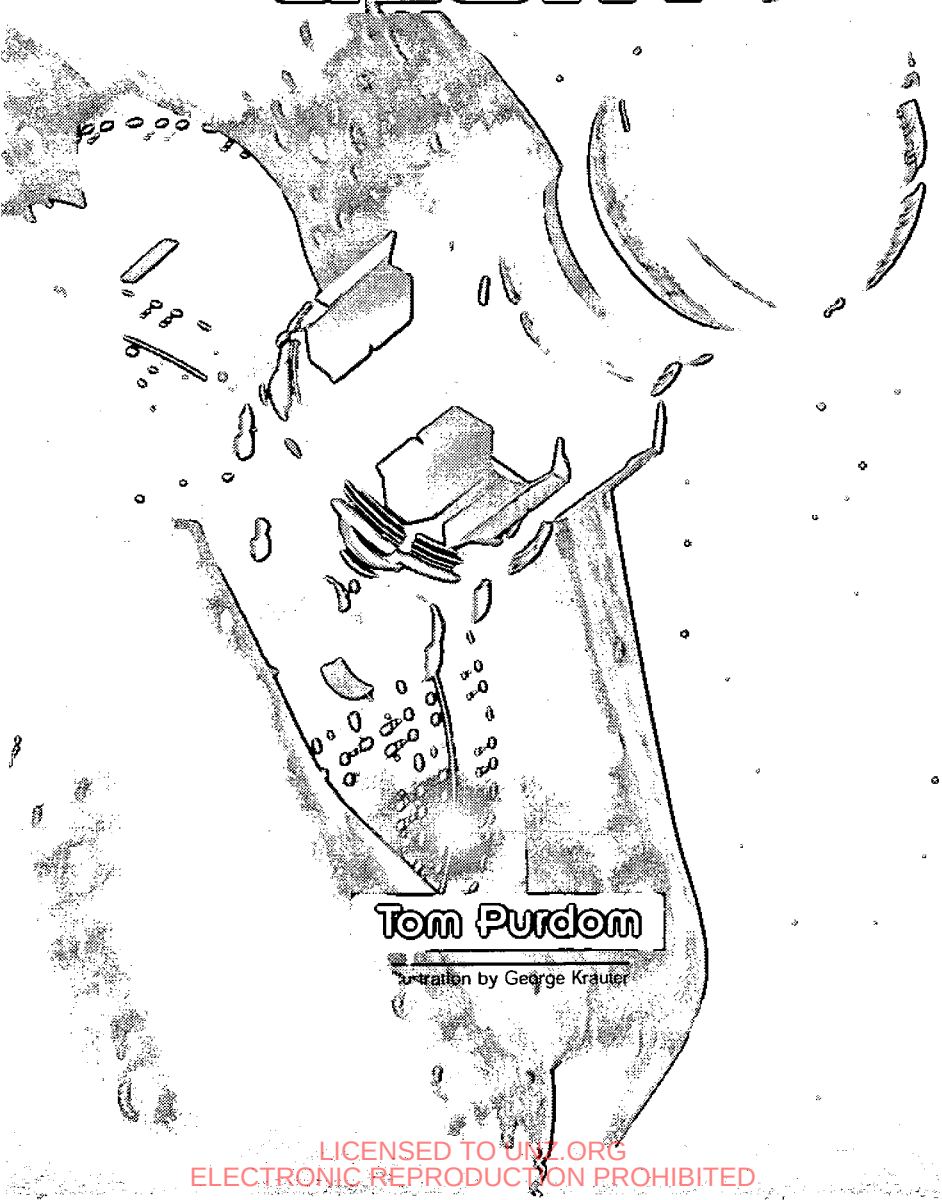
SERGEANT MOTHER GLORY



Tom Purdom

Illustration by George Krauter

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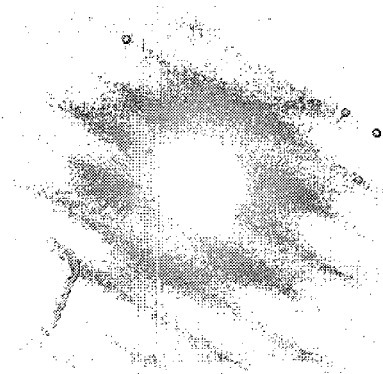
As a sequel to "Legacies" (January 1994), "Sergeant Mother Glory" is Tom Purdom's "second attempt to write a science fiction story about people coping with the ramifications of military childhoods. I'm a Navy brat who was born in 1936 and grew up during a period that included W.W.II, the Korean War, and the beginnings of the Cold War." Mr. Purdom began reading science fiction in the summer of 1950. He's marking his fiftieth anniversary as an SF person with "a Hugo nomination for 'Fossil Games' (*Asimov's*, February 1999), stories in *Asimov's* and David Hartwell's best of the year collection, and a flurry of electronic reprints on Fictionwise <*fictionwise.com*> and Alexandria Digital Literature <*alexlit.com*>."



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There were seventy-one items in the cargo and they had all been shaped by two of the most celebrated designers in the solar system. The men were lithe and muscular, the women lithe and curvy. Psychologically, they were all good-humored and wonderfully amenable. The physiologist on the design team believed they set a new standard for amenability. He had worked out a biochemical modification that had astounded the psychologist when she had analyzed the results. Their destination was a new resort hotel an ambitious entrepreneur was fabricating on the surface of one of the younger asteroid cities.

There were twenty-six men and forty-five women. They started their journey in a waiting room next to a "secret," "unregistered," port just under the surface of Ronaka City. Twenty minutes before departure time, their mentors told them to undress and form five lines. There was no talking or fidgeting. The men eyed the women and the women returned little smiles. Chronologically, the oldest was sixteen, the youngest a little under fifteen. Physiologically, they were all nineteen to twenty.

On the surface of the asteroid, a ship was being loaded with cargo silos that had been passed through an officially authorized port. The ship itself was essentially a framework of girders with a spherical crew habitat at the front end. A crane lifted eight silos out of the official port and a suite of preprogrammed molecular devices fastened the silos to the framework.

The crew halted the countdown ten minutes before the ship was supposed to leave the asteroid. A boarding tube snaked out of the secret port and fastened itself to the side of a cargo silo. Boxes of false cargo flew down the tube. The mentors gave the word and the real merchandise climbed up the tube and settled into the individual mesh cocoons waiting in the silo. A piston pushed the ship away from the city. The huge solar sail mounted at the front of the crew habitat started expanding. Ten hours after the ship left Ronaka City, the sail had become a silver mirror six kilometers in diameter. Sunlight exerted its steady, gentle pressure on twenty-eight square kilometers of reflecting surface. In the darkness inside the clandestine silo, molecular machines scurried along the fibers that held the secret cargo and injected nutrients and sedatives as they were needed. Thousands of other moles floated in the spaces between the cocoons and collected body wastes.

The front section of the silo concealed a small crew habitat and a smaller version of the sail that loomed over the front of the ship. Twenty-three hours after departure, the three people crowded into the secret habitat examined the information on their screens and debated one of the most important decisions they would ever make.

They knew the Interception Patrol had placed a ship somewhere in the space around Ronaka. They had been advised their surveillance suite could identify a typical patrol ship out to twenty thousand kilometers.

They argued for almost two hours. In the end, two of them voted in the affirmative and one shrugged and accepted the decision. The fake silo broke away from the cargo ship. Its thrusters pushed it away from the ship at a ten degree angle.

"Look at it this way," the female member of the trio had said. "If a patrol ship does try to pursue us, it's going to be twenty thousand kilometers away when it spots us. It will take it over three tendays to close the gap. How many officers are going to launch a chase knowing they're committing themselves to spending thirty edays coming after us? And another thirty working their way back to Ronaka?"

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As it turned out, their equipment wasn't quite as good as it was supposed to be. The nearest patrol ship was seventeen thousand kilometers away, not twenty. The ship was keeping station near a small asteroid and their sensors had failed to distinguish it from the rocky background behind it.

The crew habitat on the patrol ship was a sphere four meters in diameter. The entire crew consisted of one young officer who was strapped into a web in front of his screenbank. The half pips of a sublieutenant adorned the collar of his neatly belted blue uniform tunic. The ID strip over his right pocket displayed one of the most famous names in the Fourth International Brigade. Millions of people all over the solar system could have told you his mother had been Gunnery Sergeant Wei, his father was Assault Sergeant Kolin, his first name was Denif, and people who valued his society called him Den, not Deni.

"The surveillance system has detected a suspicious event in quadrant two," the Voice of the patrol ship said.

Sublieutenant Denif Wei-Kolin waved his hand at the large screen in the center of the bank. A plot of his section of the asteroid belt replaced the training simulation that had been helping him pass the time. A circle surrounded a pair of symbols.

"The indicated ship launched from Ronaka approximately twenty-six hours ago," the Voice said. "One cargo silo has separated from the main assembly."

"Give me a one-k zoom. Center on the silo."

The imaging program closed in on a white cylinder. The front end of the silo looked slightly misshapen—as if it had acquired an irregular lump.

"Zoom on the forward end of the silo."

The imaging program zoomed to its maximum magnification and presented him with an interpretable view of the anomalous lump. The silo had been equipped with its own solar sail. The crew was already deploying it.

"Maintain observation. Maintain a continuous calculation of pursuit orbits."

The sail reached its maximum expansion five hours after the Voice had reported the sighting. It was less than two kilometers on a side. His own sail was a rectangle five kilometers by three. He had four times the sail area and his sail was pulling a cramped little sphere with one passenger.

"It's rest time," the Voice reminded him an hour later.

Denif slipped out of his uniform and placed it in the clothing recycler. The closet presented him with a fresh set of blue pajamas and he zipped himself into the sleeping cocoon. When he woke up six hours later, the Voice advised him the silo had been following the same course for the last five hours.

"Give me the current time to interception."

"Seven hundred and seven hours."

Denif stared at the screen. He had been patrolling the area around Ronaka for almost two tendays and this was his first significant sighting. He was supposed to spend twenty tendays on continuous patrol.

"Commit to an interception course. Advise Surveillance we have initiated interception."

The initiation message bounced through the relays scattered across the solar system and deposited all the copies required by regulations in all the relevant databanks. One copy eventually settled into the appropriate databank at Hammarskjold Station—the off-Earth military headquarters the

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UN Secretariat had established in orbit around the Moon, in the days when it had been observing the political maneuverings of the lunar cities. A search program noted the name attached to the message and passed it to the Voice of an office located in the medical section of the station.

"Sublieutenant Denif Wei-Kolin has initiated an interception," the Voice reported.

The lieutenant major who occupied that particular office was an exceptionally tall woman with a round, good-natured face that was one of her chief professional assets. At the moment, Medical Lieutenant Major Dorothy Min was scanning the results of a three hour simulation. On her primary work screen, Logistics Sergeant Prandit Khan was exchanging views on childhood with three simulated eight year old boys. On the large screen located just under the primary screen, a set of multicolored charts was offering her a running summary of the evaluations the program was making. The consensus seemed to be a firm picture of a man who had developed amnesia sometime around his tenth birthday—and made no attempt to recover the lost memories.

"Give me a text summary," Lieutenant Major Min said.

A six line briefing hopped onto an empty screen.

"Is that a typical pursuit time? Three tendays?"

"Are you asking for the average length of a pursuit by the Interception Patrol?"

"Whatever you've got. A range would be nice."

The Voice retreated into the stock phrases it used to fill up processing time. "Just a minute, please. I'm working on it. Seventy percent of all pursuits by the Interception Patrol are completed within one tenday. The shortest reported lasted four hours. The longest lasted four tendays and eighty-three hours."

"How many last longer than two tendays?"

"Eleven point six percent."

"Give me a daily report. Advise me when anything out of the routine happens."

People sometimes wondered why Denif always tried to practice his flute for two hours and fifteen minutes. Why not two hours? Or two and a half? Military personnel usually smiled when he told them it was because of his mother. When he had been five, his mother had read that young children shouldn't practice more than two hours a day. Naturally, she had decided that meant two hours was the *minimum* they should practice. And she had decreed that *her* child would practice two hours and fifteen minutes.

"She must have been a real sergeant," a bosomy young Logistics Lieutenant had once told him. "Right to the core."

Training simulations filled another four hours of Denif's schedule. The simulation he had been working on at the beginning of the pursuit was supposed to help him understand the complexities of higher level decision making. It was based on the North American water rights crisis of 2087 and he had been assigned the role of the general who had commanded the Second International Brigade—a key figure in an episode that had established some of the baselines of international relations.

There was nothing simple about a pursuit in space. The patrol ship and the cargo silo were both following orbits around the sun and they were subject to all the peculiarities of orbital mechanics. If the patrol ship speeded

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up, it would move away from the sun and take up a slower orbit. If it slowed down, it would fall toward the sun and slip into a faster orbit. In practice, the ship was approaching the cargo silo on a long shallow arc. First it would veer sunward. Then it would turn outward and close with its quarry.

But that was only one aspect of the problem. Newton's First Law of Motion had to be taken into account, too. Once a spacecraft assumed a certain speed and direction, it "persevered in its state of motion" until it was "compelled to change that state by forces impressed thereon." It would keep going, in other words, until something slowed it down. The sunlight pushing on Denif's sail created an acceleration that was laughable by the standards of the reaction engines that pushed high speed interplanetary military ships. But his ship kept on gaining speed, day after day, without a break. At the end of three tendays it would be moving at approximately one hundred kilometers per hour. The cargo silo, on the other hand, would only be traveling at twenty-five kilometers per hour. Denif would sweep past it without stopping.

If he wanted to match speeds with the cargo silo, he had to start using his sail as a drag long before he reached the interception zone. The precise point would be calculated by the Voice. But he was the one his superiors would be watching. He was the one who would add a commendation to his file.

It was going to be a long, complicated business. It was going to take all the drive and persistence his mother had tried to pound into his personality.

The face on the screen was a composite manufactured from the faces of ten famous women. Every time Dorothy Min activated her dialogue system, the dialogue program sorted through a new batch of random combinations and picked the first synthesis that met its aesthetic standards. This one was dominated by the square, no-nonsense features of Midi Fuchida, the diplomat who had been the Secretariat's chief negotiator for most of the second half of the twenty-first century.

"There's one other matter," the dialogue image said. "For the last eight days, you've been asking for a daily check on a pursuit being undertaken by Sublieutenant Denif Wei-Kolin. According to the records, Denif Wei-Kolin was one of your first cases. Is there anything about that situation we should discuss?"

"He and his parents were my *first* cases. I worked with him for a full eyear."

"Is there some special reason you're still interested in him?"

Dorothy stared at the screen while she gave herself time to think. Her conversations with the dialogue image were recorded. Three experienced colleagues, selected from the dialogue company's consultant list, would review it sometime in the next tenday. And relay their comments through the dialogue image.

Therapists worked with people but they related to them as experts talking to clients. Dialogue programs exposed them to the rougher, peer-to-peer contacts real people lived with.

"I know things about Deni's—Denif's—early history that aren't included in the official records. I'm not a combat psychologist. But there are times when combat psychologists like to consult with therapists who've had contacts with someone they're working with. Naturally, in those circumstances, we can't give them details of the case. But we can sometimes indicate that certain courses of action might be preferable."

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"Your vocal behavior and your facial expression indicate we may be discussing an emotional subject, Dorothy."

"I'm keeping an eye on Denif Wei-Kolin because I think he could be in serious danger. He's volunteered for an assignment that tends to place inexperienced young officers into potentially violent situations. That's all I want to say about this situation at the moment."

The preparation materials for the Interception Patrol included a statement from Sahn Marashami, the Paramount Mentor of Ronaka City. The recording was updated every few tendays, to keep it synchronized with the changes in Ronakan fashions. In the latest version, Marashami wore a billowing, heavily patterned tunic and a copper belt with a buckle as big as his head.

"The buying and selling of illegally modified men and women is one of the more *inelegant* activities a member of our species can engage in," Marashami averred. "You may rest assured that the leaders of Ronaka will give you and your comrades their full cooperation as you fulfill your tedious duties."

The Paramount Mentor did not mention, of course, that the biggest moneymaker in the Ronakan economy was a group of forty-seven modification establishments. Ronaka had adapted Marashami's vision of a "consensus society." If some citizens felt they had to develop certain kinds of genetic and psychological modifications, society had no right to interfere with them. The leaders of the international community just had to recognize that Ronaka was a new kind of society, pursuing a new kind of vision.

Still, Sahn Marashami did understand that said international community could become surprisingly violent if you didn't offer it some concession to its prejudices. He had personally decreed that all cargo exiting Ronaka City would be loaded from three ports. He had graciously agreed that the Secretariat could maintain a permanent representative in the city and observe all the cargo operations that took place at all three locations.

On Earth, the laws against illegal personality modification were supported by a consensus that was almost universally accepted. Adults could only be modified with their own uncoerced consent. Unborn children could only be given modifications that would enhance their own lives.

No one objected if you gave a child a modification that would make it more intelligent or more physically capable. You could even give it temperamental qualities that would help it become a happier member of society. You were doing something entirely different, however, when you endowed an embryo with qualities that would satisfy the needs of others.

In space, the consensus was weaker. Ronaka was a notorious center of illegal modification. The international politicians in Singapore received daily exhortations from crusaders who believed the Secretariat should invade the city and install a more cooperative government. The politicians responded with bland, temporizing actions because they felt the status quo had its virtues. Sahn Marashami controlled Ronaka the way Louis XIV had controlled the nobles of France. He had turned himself into a high priest of fashion and exploited the human appetite for prestige and social distinction. The Paramount Mentor presided over a domain that was stable and pacific. The Secretariat wasn't going to disrupt an island of peace. Instead, it established patrols around cities like Ronaka and enforced the international agreements against the *transportation* of men and women who had received forbidden modifications.

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Denif had reviewed the rules of engagement as his ship had curved into the last leg of the interception. The cargo silo had entered international territory as soon as it had broken contact with Ronaka City, but he still had to follow the procedures laid down by the Secretariat. The Singapore Sages believed in the value of legal, properly authorized procedure. They had now maintained the Great Tranquility for over two hundred years. They had managed to keep the peace all those decades because they had never forgotten that mankind was turbulent and violent and their government was weak and poorly supported. It was all the more important, therefore, that they should always have the law on their side when they employed some of the less benign tools of the peacekeeper's calling.

Denif had been pursuing the cargo silo for two and a half tendays when he radioed the standard demands. He delivered the first version in Techno-Mandarin—the commonest of the six international languages—and repeated it in Hindi, the second international language he had chosen to master. Then he let the Voice translate it into French, English, Russian, and Arabic.

"This is patrol ship 419 of the Fourth International Brigade. I am about to launch semi-autonomous inspection assemblies specified in the agreements in force between the Sovereign Republic of Ronaka and the Secretariat of the United Nations of the Solar System. Please prepare to receive them as required by the terms of that agreement."

He waited fifteen minutes by his time strip and tried again. Then he waited ten more minutes—to the second.

"Voice—give me the current time to interception."

"One hundred and nine point four hours."

"Give me the interception time if I disable their sail and they stop accelerating."

"Ninety-nine point three hours."

The cargo silo was approximately seven hundred kilometers ahead of Denif's patrol ship. It was whizzing along at the tremendous speed of twenty-two kilometers per hour. Denif was doing a dazzling thirty-two kilometers per hour and decelerating so he could match velocities.

But the cargo silo was still accelerating. The Voice was telling him he would shave ten hours off the pursuit if he managed to neutralize his quarry's sail. The silo would maintain its current speed, but it would stop accelerating.

An older officer might have shrugged and let the pursuit last the extra ten hours. Denif was twenty-two and he had been pursuing the cargo silo for twenty-five edays. He gave the Voice the required orders and it started inserting the appropriate projectiles into his ship's missile launching tubes.

"One of the members of your dialogue panel says she followed one of her first cases for years, too," the dialogue image said. "She says she'd like to know what you think of your first case now."

"It was a pretty common situation," Dorothy said. "I've probably discussed fifty other cases that fit the same profile."

"Your panelist would still like to know anything you can tell her about Denif's case."

Dorothy shrugged. "Denif's situation was a classic example of one of the perennial problems of military family life. There were a lot of things wrong with his family life but the basic problems were magnified by the fact that the parents' assignments put him in an environment that changed every

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year or two. Both parents were filling two year postings on Hammarskjold when I started working with them. Then the Akara City crisis broke out. And Denif's mother was reassigned to Rinaswandi Base."

"And how did you deal with that?"

"I modified the program I'd developed for his mother so she could work with simulations and exercises that I could manage long distance. I'd worked out a standard program for both parents."

"Can you describe Denif's family life in more detail?"

"Denif's parents were both people who were passing on the results of their own developmental disasters. They were referred to me because somebody had noticed both parents had been treated for broken bones within the last thirty tendays. When both his parents were home, he had to live with quarrels that sometimes became violent. When his father was away, his environment was dominated by a mother who had been the sixth child in an impoverished—*chaotically* impoverished—ten child family. Gunnery Sergeant Wei thought she had to keep her child striving after perfection every minute of the day. When *she* was away, he lived with a father who tended to live for the day and ignore the future. Assault Sergeant Kolin had grown up in a network of relationships created by multiple divorces and gotten lost in the crowd. Every now and then, however, his military socialization would take over. And he'd get excited over something like bedwetting and decide he had to impose a little military discipline."

"Did you consider an ego strengthening emotional modification for the child? Wouldn't that be a normal part of the therapy in that kind of a situation?"

"I was doing everything by the book. All the indicators predicted they would eventually understand why he needed the modification and give me permission to apply it. Nothing would ever make them really satisfactory parents. But at least they would know why their child would benefit from the modification. He'd have some protection from the environment they created."

"Did you ever apply the modification?"

"His mother died five months into the therapy. Heroically. As one of the honored defenders of Rinaswandi Base."

The projectiles Denif launched weighed less than four grams. Magnetic pistons shoved them toward the cargo silo at a closing speed that exceeded five hundred meters per second. In six minutes, the mini-warheads crossed a distance the patrol ship would cover in approximately twenty-four hours.

Denif released eighteen missiles, three at a time. Two warheads hit the cables that attached the sail to the crew habitat. The molecular machines packed inside the warheads attached themselves to the cables and started disassembling molecules.

The repair moles built into the cables responded to the attack but they were dealing with an onslaught that had been designed to overwhelm most repair systems. The sail assumed an odd angle as the two cables severed. A third cable failed in response to the extra strain.

The repair system would mend the breaks sooner or later but it would take days—and Denif could always fire another spread as soon as the sail started to function. The trio crowded inside the crew habitat in front of the cargo silo finally had to admit they were fighting the laws of physics and the reasonable inferences of psychology.

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"We can't get away from the silly infant," one of the men said. "Any rock brain who's chased us this long isn't going to give up now."

"We can fight him," the woman said.

"That's not the way it works. It's just one cargo. They get you this time, you make it up next time."

"*You'll* make it up next time. If I have to go back there now . . . without anything to show for this . . ."

"We told you that could happen. I'm sorry it happened with your first shipment. That's bad luck. That's really bad luck."

"We have a development in the Denif Wei-Kolin situation," the Voice said.

This time, the images and symbols on Dorothy's screens were being produced by an exercise she was monitoring in real time. A lieutenant colonel and one of her husbands were participating in a six hour military simulation. The lieutenant colonel was playing the role of a pilot captain. Her husband was acting as her gunner. The two spouses were part of a double marriage that had now lasted over twenty years. The exercise was part of a program that was supposed to rekindle some of the feelings that had created the original four-way emotional bond.

"Give me a summary," Dorothy said.

"Sublieutenant Wei-Kolin has fired on the vehicle he is pursuing and neutralized its sail. The crew has responded by separating the crew habitat from the cargo silo. Sublieutenant Wei-Kolin has advised the headquarters of the Interception Patrol that he is altering course and intercepting the cargo silo."

Dorothy nodded. That was standard procedure. Illegal transporters often abandoned their goods when they knew they couldn't escape. It was a maneuver that confronted the pursuing officer with a dilemma. If the officer pursued the crew habitat and took the crew into custody, the men and women in the cargo silo would be left to themselves for an indefinite period of time. In most cases, the patrol ship abandoned the pursuit and saved the cargo.

The chase was over. Denif would intercept the cargo silo and spend three tendays hauling it back to Ronaka. He was out of danger.

"Sublieutenant Wei-Kolin has reported one complication. The cargo silo fired its thrusters for three minutes after it separated from the crew habitat. He has calculated the silo's orbit and discovered it terminates in a collision with a twenty kilometer asteroid. He has attempted to activate the silo's thrusters with his ship's emergency aid system, but he has received no response. He believes the receiver for the emergency aid system may have been deliberately disabled. He now plans to dock with the silo and attempt to connect to its thruster system. If that fails, he will alter its orbit with his sail."

Denif spent six hours watching the Voice guide the ship through the docking procedure. Cables shortened and lengthened as they altered the alignment of the sail. Thrusters nudged the ship toward the front end of the silo.

The docking latches snapped into place as if they were competing for points at an officer training school. "Voice—connect to the cargo silo's thruster system. Execute test program."

"You have problems with sail cable six, sail cable three, and sail cable two. The repair system has detected destructive molecular entities."

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A diagram occupied a screen. Arrows pointed at sites on the three cables.

"The thruster system on the cargo silo is not responding," the Voice said. "The analysis indicates the control circuits have been severed."

Denif had slipped into his combat suit just before the ship made its final approach. His personal sidearm was clipped to a rack directly over his head.

"Sail cable three is failing. Sail cable six is failing."

"Give me a visual scan of the silo's exterior. Look for movement. Look for open hatches."

Three of his external cameras had been trained on the cargo silo as he docked. Searchlights had illuminated the sections of the hull that were turned away from the sun. Scenes from two of the cameras flipped across his primary screen. The Voice zoomed in on a hatch near the rear of the hull. A red emergency helmet was sticking out of the hatch.

The helmet disappeared. The hatch swung shut. "Sail cable two is weakening," the Voice said.

"Sublieutenant Wei-Kolin should be docking with the suspect cargo silo at the present moment," the Voice of Dorothy's office said.

"Show me the current position relative to the collision object."

A diagram appeared on one of Dorothy's secondary screens. The asteroid was about twenty kilometers long by fourteen kilometers wide. Estimated time to collision: eight hours and nine minutes.

Denif had inspected the inside of the cargo silo with a camera a mole had inserted through the hatch that connected the silo with his ship. The cocoons were stacked around the circumference of the silo in four layers. The only open space was a narrow tunnel that ran down the center of the silo, between the inner layer of cocoons. The person who had fired on his sail cables was apparently hiding in the back of the silo, at the other end of the tunnel.

The hatch swung open in response to his muttered version of the correct open-sesame. His shoulder muscles twitched a command to the maneuvering jet strapped on the back of his combat suit. He kicked off from a bulkhead and the jet pushed him into a curve that bent to the left as he snaked through the hatch. The stubby little weapon in his hand propelled a dozen missiles toward the rear of the silo.

He curled into a tight defensive ball, just to the left of the little tunnel, and waited for an answering volley. His combat suit could protect him against hits from moles, but it had calculable limits. Like most defensive systems, it could be overwhelmed.

His unseen adversary shouted an order in a voice that sounded like a female version of the tone very verbal people adopted when they played team sports. A naked young man shot out of the tunnel. Denif launched a three shot spread.

Needle-thin projectiles penetrated the young man's skin. Moles spread through his body and latched onto critical nerve junctions. The effects reached his brain and he slumped into unconsciousness.

More males shot out of the tunnel. Arms clutched at Denif's legs. A hand grabbed for his gun. The third male out of the tunnel executed a free fall twist and launched a kick at Denif's head.

Denif had known someone would be waiting for him with a gun. The mob assault caught him by surprise. His video inspection had indicated all the

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members of the cargo were dreaming in their cocoons. His shoulder muscles activated a full strength blast from the maneuvering jet and pushed him away from the incoming kick. His left hand balled into a fist and clubbed the head of the man clutching at his legs. A shot from the gun stopped the hand that was reaching for the gun barrel. The pressure from the jet eased him toward the open hatch. Two more men flowed out of the tunnel.

Denif had received twelve hundred hours of hand to hand combat training but this was the first time he had been involved in a real life rough and tumble. His assailants were unarmed but they didn't have to overpower him all by themselves. They just had to maneuver him so a spread from the rear of the silo could fly down the tunnel and overpower his combat suit. . . .

He choked out a close-sesame code as he floated through the hatch. The hatch swung shut and he turned his attention to the assailant who was clinging to his waist.

"Lieutenant Denif Wei-Kolin is involved in a hostage situation. A consultation committee is being organized."

"Give me a full text report on his situation."

The Voice filled an empty screen with a transcript of Denif's report on his skirmish.

"Contact the psychologist assigned to the committee," Dorothy said. "Advise the psychologist I would like to volunteer as an advisory consultant. With special knowledge of the officer involved."

The consultation committee would have to include psychologists. It would include tactical specialists and intelligence specialists, but it would include psychologists, too. You always had to consult psychologists when you were involved in anything that could be considered a hostage situation. The psychologists would try to predict the behavior of the unknown woman in the cargo unit. They would watch his reactions.

Denif's father hated psychologists. People had killed each other for thousands of years, his father had ranted. Then for some reason they had decided they couldn't do it without psychologists.

Still, there had been no way he could have avoided calling for a consultation committee. You had to call for a committee whenever you were faced with a hostage situation. This might not look like a hostage situation at first glance, but what else could you call it?

It was obvious the woman in the silo had set things up so he would have to go in and get her. First she had disabled the circuits that connected the thrusters on the cargo unit with the controls on his ship. Then she had disabled his sail so he couldn't alter the silo's course with sail power. She had sent him a message any rock brain could decipher: *If you want to repair the control circuits and save the cargo, you must enter the silo again. You must give me a chance to overpower you. And take control of your ship.*

They were now about seven hours from collision. Right now a course change of one degree would move the silo out of the path of the oncoming asteroid. In five hours, it would take almost five degrees. After that the energy requirements would start growing. At one hour from collision, the critical number would be seven and a half degrees. At half an hour, it would be almost fourteen degrees.

Was she really willing to kill her whole cargo if she didn't get her way? Was she really willing to die herself?

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The combat psychologist on the committee was five years younger than Dorothy but she was already a full major. Combat specialists tended to make rank faster than support specialists.

Family therapists helped military personnel cope with their personal lives. Combat psychologists helped them evaluate their adversaries and fulfill the primary purpose of their professional lives.

"As you've probably noticed," Dorothy messaged Combat Major Fei, "I worked with Denif Wei-Kolin's family when he was a child. I was working with them when his mother was killed at Rinaswandi Base."

Major Fei's elegant, fine-boned face popped onto Dorothy's screen fifteen minutes later.

"I was just getting ready to call you," Major Fei said. "I would have called you earlier, but I wasn't sure you'd feel you could help me. That must have been one of your earlier cases, Dorothy."

"It was my first."

"And Sergeant Wei died while you were working with her?"

"Yes."

Major Fei shook her head. Dorothy tended to hang around with medical personnel, but she and Fei Zhu had chatted at meetings and they had hit it off in spite of some of Dorothy's less exalted feelings. Zhu was an exquisite example of the kind of female contemporaries Dorothy had hated when she had been a gawky adolescent.

"I can't give you a lot of information about Denif," Dorothy said. "Not without violating his privacy rights. But there are things about his personality structure that I'm aware of—things that could affect the way he handles this."

"How long had you been working with his family when his mother died?"

"It had been about four months. When we first started, I had been operating under the assumption I'd have all the time I needed. It was a pretty cut and dried case. It was obvious the best long term outcome would be an improvement in Deni's family environment and an ego strengthening emotional modification for Deni. The parents were receiving the standard training in parental skills and we were engaging in counseling that would give them a better understanding of the situation. If Deni's mother had lived a few months longer, I'm confident she and her husband would eventually have given me permission to apply the modification."

"But she died before she could give you permission?"

"Yes."

"And the father wouldn't grant it?"

"I discussed it with him. It was a difficult situation—he was on a troop ship heading for the asteroid belt and I was here on Hammarskjold. In the end—in the end he turned the idea down."

"That must have been a rough start."

"It wasn't the best introduction I could have asked for. I was still working with a mentor—a civilian the Brigade had arranged for me—and he thought I should forget about the law and administer the modification anyway."

"But you didn't?"

"It was tempting. But I decided I couldn't. We were sending a combat force to Akara City because we were supposed to be enforcing the laws against involuntary personality modification. If I administered a modification without the proper legal procedures . . ."

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"But your mentor did feel it was necessary?"
"Yes."
"You can't tell me why, I presume."
"Not without Denif's permission."
"And you don't think he'd let you have it?"
"I can almost guarantee he wouldn't let me have it."
"Can you tell me if you agreed with your mentor?"

Dorothy hesitated. They were both working near the edges of the rules. There were only so many reasons why a seven-year-old boy would need an ego strengthening emotional modification before he learned that his mother had died. Any trained psychologist could look through the information on Denif and his parents that was stored in the databanks and eliminate most of them.

"I felt it would have a significant effect on his personality development," Dorothy said.

"We've already made two decisions and transmitted them to Lieutenant Wei-Kolin. But I definitely want you in my corner, Dorothy. You'll have to pass stuff through me, but I'm afraid that's the protocol. I'll try not to be a dragon."

"You have received two transmissions," the Voice said. "One consultation message. One software package."

"What's the software?" Denif said.

"One program for fabricating wire fabricating moles."

"Display the consultation."

The face that hopped onto his screen belonged to one of the best known officers in the Fourth International Brigade. Colonel Xide Jen-kan had been an Assault Major at the time of the Akara City incident. He had led the troops who had attacked the largest entrance to the city and overcome the harshest defense the Zen Random forces had mustered. Half the Zen Random troops had been given personality modifications that completely eliminated their fear of death and injury.

"This is only a preliminary response," Colonel Xide said. "We'll send you a more thoughtful message as soon as we've done some real thinking. We're sending you the fabrication program but we feel it has serious limitations. You will have to place the moles in position by hand and you will have to stand by on the surface of the cargo unit and guide them as they connect your controls with the thrusters. The woman in the cargo silo will probably hear you moving about. You'll obviously be better off confronting her one-on-one outside the silo. But you *will* have to deal with her if she comes out again. For now, we think you should undock and move away from the cargo silo. Don't say anything to her. We have people on this committee who have studied every encounter the Interception Patrol has executed. Adventurers who transport illegal cargoes are primarily interested in the financial return. If you let her sit there for two or three hours and think about the crash she's heading toward, there's a good chance she'll start paying attention to gain-loss calculations."

Colonel Xide smiled. "That's the committee's thinking at this moment, anyway. We've messaged the Secretariat representative in Ronaka and asked him for any information he can give us on the possible identity of the woman. In the meantime, we'd like you to know we all think you did the correct thing when you asked for consultation. Your adversaries have confront-

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ed you with a particularly slippery situation. We'll try to give you our best support."

The Hammarskjold screen-meeting system had a serious drawback. You could only see the person who was actually talking at the moment. You couldn't see what people were doing when they were just listening—a piece of information Dorothy had always found useful when she attended in-person meetings.

Major Fei was suggesting they might be dealing with someone who was more determined than most illegal transporters. "I would say the preliminary evidence indicates she may be an amateur—somebody who's out to make a big one-time profit. She stayed with the silo when her partners abandoned it. She actually fired at a patrol ship. I think we have to assume there's an even chance she'll come out and fight Denif on the surface of the hull if he attempts to fabricate a set of external thruster cables."

The committee included one veteran of the Interception Patrol—a combat lieutenant major who had made seven successful interceptions. "Personally, I'm inclined to tell him he should start laying the wires right now," the combat lieutenant major said. "He may as well fight it out now—while he's still got plenty of time."

Colonel Xide's face popped onto the screen. It was the first time Dorothy had worked with him, but she had already decided he was probably a master at committeeship. There was nothing imposing about him, but you were always aware he was guiding things—even when he wasn't on the screen.

"I've just received an intelligence report," Colonel Xide said. "The Secretariat representative on Ronaka seems to think we're dealing with one of the best known people in the city—Cam Ru."

The screen flickered for a moment as the program dealt with a flutter of exclamations. "I found it hard to believe, too," Colonel Xide said. "But the Representative has verified that Cam Ru hasn't been seen in Ronaka in several tendays. No one is hunting for her. There's no sign anyone is worried about her."

Dorothy penned a command on her notescreen. A secondary screen lit up and a search program presented her with a screenful of text. The program had located a summary of Cam Ru's biography in a sports databank and decided the summary should be the first item it offered her.

"The Representative has given me some information on Cam Ru's current situation," Colonel Xide said. "She's been holding down a minor political appointment for approximately two eyears. It seems to be generally assumed she's slipped into a comfortable retirement."

"Do we know how well off financially she really is?" Major Fei asked. "She could certainly fit the standard model for an amateur transporter in some ways. If she feels she's come down in the world. And a big profit would restore some of her old status."

"I used to watch her all the time," the combat lieutenant major said. "She's a real expert at low-g maneuvering."

Dorothy had never been a sports enthusiast. She could never identify with people who could maneuver their bodies with the grace professional athletes brought to their work. She had heard of Cam Ru, however. Cam Ru had been one of the stars of low-g polo—the most popular sport in the off-Earth cities. Every city in the asteroid belt had turned some of its interior space into one of the cavernous low-g arenas in which people like Cam Ru

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showed off their skills. Dorothy's daughter had been one of Cam Ru's more idolatrous fans. Dera's personal databanks were stuffed with videos of Cam Ru executing enormous, incredibly precise low-g leaps. Cam Ru had been especially noted for her skill with the back jet—for her ability to leap into the air and activate a spurt from her jet at the precise moment the extra force would carry her a few meters higher and let her make a clever, unexpected grab at the ball.

Colonel Xide had returned to the screen and noted that he had only had one experience with combat on the surface of a space habitat. He paused for a moment—as if he were reconsidering what he had just said—and smiled.

"Actually, it was my only experience in *combat*."

The meeting program picked up a few offscreen chuckles. "It seems to me Cam Ru's ability to maneuver in low-g could be an important factor," Colonel Xide continued. "Low-g polo is a one-tenth-g activity and she'll be operating in zero g, for all practical purposes, if she attacks Lieutenant Wei-Kolin on the surface of the cargo silo. But I'm not sure that's a significant difference."

Dorothy placed her stylus on her notescreen. She shaped a memo to Fei Zhu in the round, deliberate cursive she used when she was sending important messages to people who weren't familiar with her ordinary handwriting.

When you set priorities—I strongly recommend you tell Denif his own survival is priority number one.

Denif glanced at his time strip. It had been half an hour since he had undocked.

If he had followed his own impulses, he would be standing on the silo right now, ready to get this over with. But that wasn't up to him. He'd asked the experts for advice and they'd responded. They might change their minds once they'd thought about it. In the meantime he would just have to wait.

That was one of the qualities that made you human. You didn't have to follow your impulses. You could override them. And do something else.

Can you give me any reasons I can offer the other members of the committee? Major Fei memoed. *Remember—Denif is one of our more popular young officers.*

Dorothy's stylus crawled across her notescreen. *Can you say you have a consultant who is familiar with Denif's personal psychology? And the consultant feels he has a tendency to take excessive risks? I think most of our military colleagues would feel that's a respectable trait. I also think you should take that into consideration when you consider the length of time you should let Cam Ru wait. He'll probably keep fighting right down to the limit if she tries to stop him. I believe there's a significant danger he could hold on a little too long. And find he can't escape from the situation before the silo collides with the asteroid.*

She couldn't put it in writing but she was assuming Fei Zhu understood Denif's personality structure. Anyone with a professional knowledge of general psychology could guess what had happened when Denif's mother died. The facts she had laid out had all pointed to the same conclusion. The child in the family had been subjected to intolerable stresses—stresses that had been created by his parents. When he had learned his mother had died, Deni had probably experienced a moment of sheer joy. One of his secret fantasies had finally been fulfilled.

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Unfortunately, in most cases that moment of joy was immediately followed by a massive guilt reaction. And the massive guilt reaction was followed—almost instantly—by a massive act of repression. For the rest of his life, the child's personality would be distorted by a secret guilt—a guilt that was so unbearable he couldn't even admit it existed.

The ego strengthening emotional modification was the treatment of choice for children who were trapped in the kind of family life Deni's parents had created. Counseling could improve his parents' behavior, but it couldn't turn them into the kind of parents he really needed.

The modification would have protected him against the worst effects of their actions. The therapist applied a combination of drugs and conditioning techniques, and the child acquired a sense of self worth that would carry him into adulthood with his basic personality intact. He might feel like screaming with rage when he remembered his parents' actions. But he would never succumb to the belief that he had been subjected to that kind of stress because there was something wrong with him.

The modification could have protected Deni against the guilt reaction, too. Normally the treatment was administered three times. One treatment, just before he learned his mother had died, would have inoculated him against the worst effects.

Denif could always have the guilt reaction reversed, of course. With modern techniques, he could be liberated from a crippling burden in a few days of intensive, almost painless therapy. But that could only happen if he himself decided he needed help. And why should he do that? He was, from his own viewpoint, a cool, highly competent young officer—a young man with a bright future. His elders beamed with pleasure when they talked about him.

Dorothy could have predicted Denif would join the Interception Patrol. The Fourth International Brigade was essentially a standby force. It was a threat the leaders of the off-Earth governments had to worry about when they contemplated certain kinds of behavior. Once every twenty years or so, the international politicians decided some hoodlum had gone too far and the Brigade actually engaged in the killing and maiming that was its ultimate raison d'être. The Interception Patrol was the one assignment that could offer a young officer some hope he could engage in real military derring-do right at the start of his career.

Denif held the flute to his lips with his arms set into the precise angles he had been assuming ever since he had reached his full growth. He was playing from memory, so he could keep an eye on the screen that displayed the cargo silo.

Had his mother felt like this as she had waited for the final assault on Rinaswandi Base?

It had been a tougher situation, obviously. In her case, the enemy had been armed with explosive, armor-penetrating warheads. They hadn't been playing games with non-lethal moles.

People who had grown up in civilian families sometimes looked horrified when he told them about the things his mother had done when he had been a child. But that was the way it was in military families. Military parents knew the world wasn't really as safe and comfortable as civilians thought it was. The civilians could enjoy their cozy little lives because people like his father and mother were willing to do things that required discipline and self-control.

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"We obviously have a dilemma," Colonel Xide said. "If we really are dealing with Cam Ru, she could be a formidable opponent in a low-g environment. Lieutenant Wei-Kolin would be better off if we let her ponder her situation for as long as possible, in the hope she'll give in without a fight. On the other hand, we have to consider Major Fei's personality model. As Major Fei has pointed out, Cam Ru was noted for her tendency to win games by taking exorbitant risks. If we tell him to wait her out, she may sit there right up to the last minute. According to our best calculations, the fuel in the cargo silo's thrusters can power a course change of about six degrees at maximum. It will reach that point about one hour and fifteen minutes before collision. If Cam Ru holds on just a minute or two longer, we could lose every person in her cargo."

"She took risks playing *games*," the combat lieutenant major said. "This is the first time she's tried to take a risk with her life."

"The model includes two factors that could indicate she may hold out too long," Major Fei said. "Her risk taking proclivities are important, but her level of desperation could be even more important. She spent two decades as a high income celebrity. In her last six games, she made a desperate attempt to remain competitive even though she knew she was being superseded by younger people with genetic enhancements that left her hopelessly outclassed. Everything she's done so far indicates she's determined to build up her bank account and regain some of the social status she enjoyed before she retired. I won't go into all the details, but her childhood background supports that conclusion."

Fei Zhu had passed Dorothy a copy of the personality model she was working with. Like all personality models, it looked like a random tangle of three-dimensional vectors and bars. It was a crude, first-order model—a collection of estimates and assumptions patched up from the information in the public databanks.

The information on Cam Ru's childhood had been spotty, but Dorothy could see why Zhu felt it reinforced her portrait of a desperate risk taker. Cam Ru was the product of the commonest type of triplet—a husband and two wives. Her mother had been the first wife. The evidence seemed to indicate her father had been the dominant personality in the marriage and the second wife had been his idea. It was a pattern that frequently produced fiercely independent daughters. When you matched it with Cam Ru's playing style, you were looking at a portrait of a driven, stubbornly competitive personality.

Cam Ru had been a major celebrity. Fei Zhu's model could have incorporated information on her food tastes and the type of men she usually added to her entourage. But there was a difference between a personality model built on information collected from the databanks and a model built on responses to simulations and personal interviews. They knew what the information they had seemed to indicate. They didn't know how it would be modified if they subjected Cam Ru to a battery of properly designed probes.

The tactical specialist on the committee took over the screen. "I'd like to suggest that we table this subject for now and spend a little time establishing our priorities. It's been my experience that a lot of issues tend to melt away once you establish your priorities."

Lieutenant Colonel Litteren had been one of the quieter members of the committee. She had never been in combat but she had acquired a reputation with the people who performed the Brigade's ultimate function. She had

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spent her career studying simulations and historical situations and there seemed to be a general feeling her conclusions had some practical value.

She may not have been there herself, one of Dorothy's clients had once told her. *But she understands the things you have to think about.*

"It seems to me the priorities in this situation are pretty cut and dried," Colonel Xide said. "I think most of us here know what the priorities are going to be when we set them."

"A formal statement can still have a clarifying effect. It creates a structure that tends to organize the rest of the discussion."

"We have to do it sooner or later," the combat lieutenant major said.

Colonel Xide nodded. "If no one has any objections then . . . priority setting is a procedure that has legal standing. Lieutenant Wei-Kolin can use our priorities in his defense if he is faced with any legal action. You'll find a copy of the standard statement on your screens. I will now read it to you, as regulations require."

A copy of the statement replaced Colonel Xide on Dorothy's primary screen. It was a formal Secretariat document, so it had been composed in Techno-Mandarin. The committee members had all been speaking Ghurkali—the working language of a brigade that traced its institutional ancestry to an Indian regiment called the Fourth Gurkha Rifles.

"In any situation involving hostages," Colonel Xide read, "the military and police authorities responsible for the situation must consider the lives of four groups: the hostages, the general public, the rescue personnel, and the hostage takers. Experience has shown that any attempt to place an equal value on the lives of all four groups will frequently produce a chaotic outcome, with a loss of life that would have been avoided if the authorities had given the rescue personnel a clear statement of priorities. The authorities responsible for the rescue attempt are therefore required to present the rescue force with a ranking of the relative value of the groups. Generally, the ranking will be as follows: first, the general public; second, the hostages; third, the rescue personnel."

This was the first time Dorothy had observed a consultation committee that was discussing a hostage case. As Colonel Xide's voice droned on, she realized she was observing one of the harsh rituals that characterized her professional subculture.

"Generally, the hostage takers are left unranked," Colonel Xide continued. "If the hostage takers are given a ranking, the responsible authorities must detail the limits of permissible force and clarify any questions the commander of the rescue force may raise. Please sign your names to the statement."

"Unranked" was, of course, a polite way of saying *zero*. Or even *negative*. In many cases, the rescue personnel were sent into action with orders to kill the hostage takers on sight.

The statement vanished from the screen. The regular members of the committee had all written their names on their notescreens. A signed copy had been filed in the databanks.

"In this situation," Colonel Xide said, "we can obviously ignore the possibility Lieutenant Wei-Kolin may harm some member of the general public. I believe the nearest member of the general public is several thousand kilometers from the scene of the action. If we follow the standard procedure, the officer executing the rescue will be advised he is supposed to rank the illegal modifieds first and himself second. I realize it's difficult to sit here—safe

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and unthreatened—and tell a promising young officer he's supposed to place the lives of seventy-one other people ahead of his own. There was a time when I was one of the young officers who received that kind of message. I can assure you I had no problems with it. I felt they were merely restating the commitment I made when I took my oath. Lieutenant Major Park, do you have anything to say on that? You're the other person on this committee who's been in combat."

The program switched to the combat lieutenant major without waiting for him to speak. He offered the group a wry smile and they responded with a murmur of sardonic chuckles.

"It's the glory of our profession, sir."

Denif lowered the flute. It had been over an hour now since he had undocked—an hour and a half since he had received his preliminary instructions. The woman in the cargo unit knew he had undocked. She would have heard the clang when he released the latches. Was she wondering if he had left the scene and abandoned her and her cargo?

There were two hatches near the rear of the silo. He could see them come into view as the silo rotated on its long axis. One was painted red. One was painted green.

Major Fei had presented her suggestion. She had done it somewhat diffidently, in Dorothy's opinion, but that was probably a good way to introduce the idea.

Lieutenant Colonel Litteren had raised the obvious objection. Major Fei was suggesting they violate one of the Brigade's strongest traditions. They had *always* ranked the survival of the hostages above the survival of the rescue personnel. It would look particularly bad if they violated the tradition in a situation like this, Colonel Xide pointed out.

No one had to be told what Colonel Xide meant by a "situation like this." The Interception Patrol had been organized in response to ferocious political pressures. There were people who believed "designer-made" humans were a bigger threat to human society than all the nuclear, biological, and psychological weapons mankind had ever created. In the last hundred and fifty years the illegal modification shops had produced assassins, bodyguards, prostitutes, and whole battalions of loyal, skilled soldiers.

The activists who worried about the assassins and the soldiers weren't the only people who fired their rhetoric at the international politicians. In the eyes of another group of campaigners, the men and women sleeping in Cam Ru's cargo silo were "the victims of an obscene assault on human dignity." They were the products of genetic modification and intensive childhood conditioning programs. Their biochemistry had shaped their basic temperament and a controlled, carefully planned childhood environment had finished the job. They had been subjected to an attack on their humanity, the argument ran, before their first cell had started dividing.

"In practice," Major Fei said, "there's no danger Sublieutenant Wei-Kolin will rank himself above the hostages. My consultant has suggested we do this because she feels he may take bigger risks than he should—that he might continue fighting, for example, after most officers would recognize the situation is hopeless."

"Can she offer us any evidence for this conclusion?" Combat Lieutenant Major Park asked.

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"Her advice is based on her knowledge of Lieutenant Wei-Kolin's personality structure."

"He's not the only young officer who's displayed such tendencies," Lieutenant Colonel Litteren said.

"In this case . . . we may be dealing with an extreme example."

Colonel Xide frowned. "Is she suggesting we may expose the officer to extra danger if we follow the usual procedure? Because of some quirk in his personality?"

Dorothy grabbed her notescreen. *It's not a quirk. It's fundamental. And he's alone. There's no one there who can question his judgment.*

"That about sums it up," Major Fei said. "The fact that he's alone increases the danger. If he had someone else with him, they might be able to warn him when it's clear the cargo unit is too close to the collision point."

"It seems to me that's a good argument for telling him he should start the wire fabricating procedure right away," Lieutenant Major Park said. "He now has less than four hours."

"We're discussing the priorities," Lieutenant Colonel Litteren said. "First we should determine our priorities. Then we discuss other matters."

"Priorities have implications," Lieutenant Major Park argued.

"First we set the priorities. Then we find out what their implications are. Believe me—it's the only way to do it. Once you know what your priorities are, everything else becomes clear."

"There's only one way we can set the priorities," Park said. "We have a tradition. We can't violate it—not in a situation like this."

A message appeared on Dorothy's notescreen. *Would it help if we gave him a firm statement he's supposed to leave the silo and return to his ship by a specified time?*

I'm not sure he would obey it. He wouldn't be the first young officer to disregard something like that. Do you really think anybody would hold it against him if he did?

Of course not. But it looks like it's the best we can do.

Then I agree with Lieutenant Major Park—have him start laying the new cables right away. It would probably help, too, if you emphasized that you're placing the usual priority on Cam Ru's life. Make sure he knows her celebrity status doesn't give her any special protection.

"I have received the following orders from my superior officers. I have been ordered to advise you there can be only one conclusion to this situation. You must surrender your weapons and give me full control of you and your cargo. If you do not comply within three hours, I have been ordered to save my own ship and place it on a new course."

The databanks said Cam Ru spoke Techno-Mandarin and English, but Denif transmitted the ultimatum in all six languages anyway. There was still some possibility the woman in the silo wasn't Cam Ru.

The instructions from the consultation committee had left him some leeway. They hadn't told him he had to give Cam Ru another hour. They had merely suggested it would be preferable. *We'll abide by your decision,* Colonel Xide had said. *The personality model indicates you are dealing with a desperate personality. But our combat psychologist admits there is room for error. If you wait the extra hour, it will make it clear we tried to give her a chance.*

Cam Ru held on for another forty minutes before she finally responded. "I

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have seventy-one people here," she said in Techno-Mandarin. "Are you trying to tell me the Secretariat will let them all die if I don't submit to your demands?"

The wire fabricators were smooth yellow squares about ten centimeters on a side. The first one included a six-pronged conductor. Denif plugged it into a jack on the outside of his ship and a shift from yellow to black indicated the current from the ship was supplying it with power.

The guidance unit was a wand with a needle tip. He ran the tip along the surface of the silo and an orange line started creeping along the path he had traced. If everything was operating as advertised, the moles in the yellow square were working their way down the path and converting the molecules of the ship into insulated conducting material.

The soles of his boots were equipped with moles that formed light temporary bonds with the substances they encountered. His feet were connected to the surface but he had no sense he was being forced against it. It was an interesting sensation for someone who had spent most of his life in habitats that rotated on an axis and pinned you to a floor.

The orange line reached the edge of the cargo silo and crawled toward the first thruster in the front group. He checked the connection point and guided it around the silo to the next thruster. He had activated a time strip on his visor display and set it to minus two hours and eighteen minutes when he had started laying the wires. So far, the moles were operating at the slow, steady pace promised in the specs.

"The green access hatch is opening," the Voice murmured in his ear.

He clipped the guidance wand to his belt and gripped his gun with both hands. The green hatch was on the other side of the cylinder. He thought about moving and decided to let her come to him.

"A figure has exited the green hatch. It has disappeared behind the rear of the silo."

Cam Ru popped up from behind the other end of the silo. She stopped about one body length above the edge and swung her arm in his direction.

Denif brought up his gun. The red light on the sighting rod blinked on. Cam Ru dropped behind the rim of the silo.

"My defense system has absorbed two hits," the Voice of his suit said. "They are being neutralized."

He glanced at the display on the back of his gun and discovered he had actually pressed the firing button. She had moved so fast he had been functioning on automatic.

"A figure is visible in quadrant two," the Voice said.

"Give me a visual. Twelve percent."

A picture appeared in the upper left corner of his visor. Cam Ru was crouching near the green hatch. She slipped inside and the hatch closed behind her.

He unclipped the wand and started drawing the circuit path around the silo. The orange line followed him around.

She had moved fast. He didn't think he had hit her. He had watched Cam Ru play. This woman had moved just like her.

She gave him another thirty minutes to think before she came out again. He had connected all the thrusters in the front group and extended the line halfway down the silo, toward the rear group. This time he could see the

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green hatch open on his helmet display. He had arranged himself so he could move two steps to the right and shoot at the hatch as soon as she came out.

He was sending reports to the committee as things happened. "The green hatch is now fully open," he said. "I'm in position to fire."

A ping from her screenbank drew Dorothy's attention to a report from Denif. The reports were twenty-five minutes behind real time, thanks to the communications lag between Hammarskjold and Denif's position in the asteroid belt, but she had decided to look at them anyway. The people on the committee were all watching them as they took care of their regular business.

She skimmed the transcript that reported Cam Ru's first emergence and noted Denif's suit had been hit twice.

"Voice—re combat suits currently issued the Interception Patrol. Give me the number of hits the suit can absorb before the wearer is supposed to have the defense system recharged."

"Eleven."

She made him stare at the open hatch for five minutes. She came out moving slightly to the left and executed a back flip that took her over the top of the hatch cover. Denif reacted as soon as he saw her but his only target, by the time he pulled the trigger, was the soles of her boots. She dropped over the rear end of the silo and he found himself staring at the same situation she had set up before.

This time she popped up in a curve that arced to his left. He swung his gun arm after her and she swooped behind the silo headfirst.

"You have absorbed three more hits," the Voice of the suit said. "You may absorb six more hits without recharging."

Cam Ru shot across his visual field at an angle, slanting upward from left to right. She dropped behind the silo and reappeared executing an unpredictable series of zigzags. The red light on his sighting rod blinked on and off as he followed her.

"You may absorb three more hits without recharging."

Denif lifted his boots off the surface and let his back jet hurry him toward the front of the silo. His ship opened its hatch as he shot toward it. He skimmed through the hatch headfirst and reached for the jack that connected his defense system to its recharging unit.

On the image on his visor, he could see Cam Ru gliding along the silo. She landed on the surface and her foot lashed at the cable he had laid. She broke the circuit at three more points—striking at it with precise, scraping kicks—and retreated through the hatch.

He watched the hatch close behind her and realized he had run for cover because he had yielded to the pressure before she had. He could have stayed. He knew he had been hitting her. She had been swooping and zooming as if she had found a loophole in the laws of physics, but he had always been a good shot. He had pulled himself out of the firing zone because he had been afraid she would land three more shots before he realized it had happened.

How many shots could her suit take? For all he knew, she had been down to her last hit. She had taken the gamble and he had let her seize control of the whole exterior of the silo.

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The Voice broke into his reverie. "You have a voice-only message from the contact you have designated Cam Ru."

"Put her on."

"You should have stayed in the game. It was getting interesting."

Denif closed his eyes. "This isn't a game, Cam Ru. I've told you what my orders are."

Had he heard a little gasp when he said her name? Or was he just engaging in wishful thinking?

"What makes you think you know who I am?"

This was the first time he had ever talked to anybody really famous. Even now—even under these circumstances—he felt like he'd stepped into a world in which he was a totally outclassed stranger. His only guides were his orders and his knowledge that he was speaking to her in an official capacity—as a representative of the highest level of government the human race had managed to create.

"I'm in contact with a committee that has all the information resources it needs at its disposal. We have standing orders. We have to ask for a consultation committee anytime we find ourselves faced with a hostage situation."

"How old are you? Do you have a name?"

"You're speaking to Sublieutenant Denif Wei-Kolin. My committee has given me the standard orders and priorities in this situation, with one special order. I've been ordered to abandon the situation and save my own ship one hour and thirty minutes before you collide with the object you have targeted."

"A sublieutenant? That means you just got your little decorations, doesn't it?"

Denif glanced at a display on one of his screens. He had automatically started topping off his oxygen pack and his backjet as soon as he had entered his crew habitat. He noted both items had reached full capacity and clicked off his radio. A ping advised him his suit defense system was fully recharged.

The gaps Cam Ru had created were all at least two meters wide. He had to redraw the guide line in each gap and wait about fifteen minutes. Then it would take him half an hour to finish the job. He would have twenty-five minutes left when the moles connected the last thruster to the circuit.

He had been moving at a slow, deliberate walk when Cam Ru had launched her second attack. Now he hurried toward the rear thrusters and worked his way around the circumference as fast as he could. He would get the line drawn and concentrate on his battle with Cam Ru while the moles finished fabricating the cable.

The green hatch popped open when he was connecting the guide line to the last two thrusters. The Voice gave him about four seconds' warning before she shot out of the hatch at top speed. She skimmed above the surface of the silo with the aiming light on her weapon blinking like it was emitting frantic signals.

"You have received six hits," the Voice of his suit reported.

The thrusters were located at the very end of the silo. The green hatch was closer to the front. This time it was his turn to drop below the rim of the silo and float behind it as it continued on its course.

He had spent his whole life in space habitats. He wasn't frightened by the fact that he was no longer attached to the silo. He took it for granted that

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he and the silo were following the same general orbit around the sun. The thrusts from his backjet made minor changes in his *relative* position. They didn't change the basic fact that he and the silo were moving in the same direction at the same speed.

It would be a different matter, of course, if he separated himself from the silo and exhausted the gas in his backjet. He could float just two meters behind the silo and be permanently stranded, with no hope he would ever regain contact.

And now she was on the silo, free to do what she wanted to do, and he was hiding behind it because he had taken six hits and decided to be cautious. He knew he had shot at her, too. He knew he had scored hits.

"Voice—connect me to Cam Ru."

"Connected."

"This isn't going to do you any good, Cam Ru. All you're doing is delaying me. In another thirty-three minutes, I'm going to get in my ship and move myself out of danger."

"I'm between you and your ship, sublieutenant. How many hits did I land this time? Five? Seven? You get squeamish when it gets up to seven or eight, don't you?"

"I can leave you now, if I think the situation is hopeless. I can undock my ship from here and bring it around."

"But you won't. You're one of the good people. You're wearing a neat blue uniform."

She was backing toward his ship as she spoke. He had one advantage over her. The cameras on the ship gave him a complete view of the whole length of the silo. He would know where she was from the moment he launched an attack.

He wasn't as skilled as she was, but he still managed to rise over the edge of the silo and fly straight toward her, skimming above the white surface with his legs stretched out behind him and his gun flickering. She sank into a crouch and fired back but he made himself keep moving.

This time she was the one who ducked out of the line of fire and put the bulk of the silo between herself and her adversary's gun. She shot off to the left, disappearing behind the curve of the silo, and he screamed an order at his ship.

"You have received nine hits total," the Voice of his suit proclaimed.

He executed a free fall flip and drove himself toward the hatch of his ship feet first. In his visor image, he could see Cam Ru crouching on the other side of the silo. Had she broken off the exchange because she was down to her last hit? Was she pretending she was vulnerable so she could draw him into a trap?

The hatch opened in response to his command. He saw Cam Ru launch herself into space and realized she was coming around behind him at the best speed her jet could produce.

His jet pushed him around so he could face her. The firing light on her gun flashed. His thumb pressed the firing button on his own weapon.

Cold touched his stomach. Cold and numbness spread through his shoulders and legs.

He was floating inside the crew habitat when the moles self-destructed and released their hold on his nervous system. His mouth was hanging open. His arms were fully extended.

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His ears picked up the pulsing beep of his gun before his neck muscles reacquired the capacity to move his head. He craned his eyes to the left and saw the butt floating near the clothing recycler.

His combat training had included a twelve hour course in the effects of non-lethal molecular weapons. His instructors had shot him five times. The last two times he had been confronted with situations that forced him to respond as soon as he recovered. *We have one advantage over the people we're pursuing,* the instructors at the Interception Patrol school had emphasized. *For them, violence is just a business technique. For us, it's the primary purpose of our working lives.*

"Voice—locate Cam Ru."

The image in his visor had been scanning the surface of the silo. It switched to a representation of the area around the silo and an arrow pointed at a small dot. It took him a moment to grasp the scale of the image. Cam Ru was approximately three kilometers from the silo.

She was still moving away from the silo. They had both obviously reached the limits of their suit defense systems at the same time. They had both continued moving in the direction they had been heading when they had lost consciousness. He had plunged into the hatch, she had sailed into space.

"Voice—do you have control of the thrusters on the silo?"

"I have control of the forward thrusters. The rear thrusters do not respond."

By now, the moles should have finished laying the new cable. If the rear thrusters weren't responding, she must have torn a break in the cable that ran between the two ends of the silo.

"Voice—load missile launching tubes. Load five rounds anti-personnel. Target—Cam Ru."

Her suit hadn't been recharged. He could put her out again with just one hit. She would keep drifting away from the silo but that couldn't be helped. They had told him what his priorities were. If he let her regain consciousness, she could still activate her back jet, regain the silo, and create more trouble.

"Loading five rounds anti-personnel. Target is altering direction."

Denif stared at the visor image. The Voice had added an arrow to the dot that represented Cam Ru. She had regained consciousness and started accelerating toward the silo.

"Fire."

In his visor, Denif could watch Cam Ru sail toward the silo as he inspected the latest round of damage. The Voice estimated she would miss it by about fifty meters.

She had rubbed a two meter break in the cable that ran from the front to the rear. The moles would have to repair that and finish connecting the rear thrusters. They should finish a few seconds before the deadline the committee had given him.

He drew the line that reconnected the break. He walked along the whole length of the circuit and made sure every segment looked functional. He watched Cam Ru pass the rear of the silo.

The countdown on his visor display had reached minus five minutes. The moles were filling the last centimeters of the gap.

"Voice—Mark time. Check thruster connection at minus 4.7 minutes. If thrusters respond—initiate course change per previous instructions. If

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thrusters do not respond—check thruster connection every ten seconds, initiate course change when thrusters respond."

He repositioned himself on the silo as the Voice repeated his orders. His eyes scanned the displays that monitored his oxygen supply and back jet fuel.

"Voice—initiate rescue guidance routine. Lock on Cam Ru. Vector me to Cam Ru."

"It looks like our priority setting exercise had some effect," Fei Zhu said.

Dorothy nodded. They had just received the report that Denif had fired on Cam Ru.

"It's too bad," Fei Zhu said. "She didn't give him any choice. But it's still too bad."

Cam Ru was tumbling head over foot at approximately one revolution per minute. Her gun had been attached to her belt with a long leash and the leash had looped around her right leg.

He grabbed her by her leg as soon as he got close enough. He pulled himself up her body and held her in a face to face embrace. His backjet started spraying reaction mass into the void. Their combined mass slowed to a stop and began moving toward the silo. The time display on his visor read minus 2.2 minutes.

He had assumed he would unclip her gun as soon as he made contact but he couldn't spare the effort. He was maneuvering an awkwardly shaped mass and he was trying to balance two conflicting demands. He had to spend fuel to keep them on course while he accelerated and he needed to save fuel so he could decelerate and maneuver when he got near the silo.

Cam Ru's body jerked in his arms. He pressed his visor against hers and saw her eyes widen.

"Please hold still. I'm trying to get you back to the silo before it executes the course change. We've got eighty seconds."

He had never heard his voice sound so shrill. There had been times during officer training school when he had suspected the staff had made him a special project and set out to rattle him at least once before graduation day. They hadn't made him sound that way once.

Cam Ru's face hardened. A surge of head to foot pressure ran through his body and he realized she had turned on her backjet.

"Take your pick, sublieutenant. Let me go or miss your ship."

A scream of absolute uncontrollable rage blasted the inside of his helmet. He shoved himself away from her and reached for the gun he had clipped to the back of his belt. She arced away from him in a long backflip and grabbed at the leash attached to her gun.

His thumb shoved in the firing button as if he were trying to drive it through the butt. He held it down until the firing light turned yellow. Then he turned on his backjet and hurled himself at the silo.

Lieutenant Major Park felt Denif was a courageous young officer who had saved seventy-one human lives and upheld the highest traditions of the Brigade. Lieutenant Colonel Litteren believed Denif should be severely reprimanded.

"Interception Patrol officers usually receive a promotion to full lieutenant when they complete their first major interception," Lieutenant Colonel Litteren said. "Could we withhold the promotion and let him know we're doing

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it because he ignored a clear set of priorities and tried to save the life of a criminal?"

Fei Zhu opened a private line to her consultant. "So what's your judgment, Madame Therapist? Is young Denif a hero or an insubordinate, sentimental daredevil?"

"Speaking as a therapist—focusing on what's best for *him*—I would second Colonel Litteren's suggestion. We're dealing with a young man who could have a very short life span if he tries something like that again. A glitch in his promotion plans may be the one measure that could have some influence on his behavior. But Major Park has a point too. We should give him all the praise we can for saving seventy-one lives. He was doing what we're here to do."

"What do our psychological experts have to say?" Colonel Xide asked. "Do you have any comments, Major Fei?"

"I'm inclined to agree with Colonel Litteren," Fei Zhu said. "My associate and I both feel Denif has a tendency to make excessive demands on himself. A little discouragement would do no harm."

"He responded to a basic human impulse," Lieutenant Major Park said.

"It was a commendable action," Fei Zhu said. "As a human being, I applaud it. But it shouldn't be encouraged."

Colonel Xide nodded. "I understand your feelings, Major Park. But I agree with Colonel Litteren. We have to let other considerations take precedence. I'm going to recommend that Denif be publicly commended for saving the illegal modifieds. And denied the customary promotion because he risked his life to save a criminal."

"Make sure he gets plenty of praise for the part he did right," Dorothy said. "He needs all the approval he can get."

"That sounds to us like the perfect formula," Fei Zhu said. "I wouldn't be stingy about praise for the way he stuck it out and saved the modifieds. I don't think we can say too much in praise of that."

"He did a fine job," Lieutenant Major Park said. "His mother would have been proud of him."

The interview program questioned Denif for an hour and twenty minutes. Then it transmitted the conversation to its controllers and questioned him for another hour after it received more instructions.

The program had been transmitted from Singapore, not Hammarskjold. It had been accompanied by a brief message from a bearded, rigidly erect civilian who identified himself as a senior case officer in the Secretariat's Media Relations Executive. "We feel it would be best if this matter were handled at the political level," the senior case officer said. "We would appreciate it if you would let us handle all contacts with the media. Your own actions—and your mother's memory—would have made this an item of major interest. Cam Ru's involvement could increase that by several orders of magnitude."

Cam Ru's death would have been a major story if she had died in bed. As it was, the story occupied a big segment of the off-Earth news media for a full tenday. The Singapore Shamen had done a very professional job. The military media office would have been shattered three hours after the onslaught began.

Dorothy's tracking program surrendered after four. From that point on, it

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gave her a summary taken from a random sampling. Most of the stories on her screens focused on Cam Ru's maneuverings and Denif's final attempt to keep her alive. *She died as she lived* comments were very popular. *Young hero risks life for star* was a strong contender.

The dialogue image stared out of the screen for several seconds when Dorothy told it Denif had been promoted to full lieutenant. "Your anger indicators are registering well outside your normal range, Dorothy."

"They should be," Dorothy said. "You'd get the same numbers if you talked to Zhu. She wanted to enter a protest but Colonel Xide told her it would be pointless. Somebody in Singapore apparently decided this whole episode was just the kind of story they needed."

"And you don't agree with that assessment?"

"They didn't need to promote him. I understand there are millions of people out there who wish our little standing army would fade into oblivion and let them spend their lives doing what they want to do. I realize our political masters believe they have to do everything they can to maintain public support. But they could have dealt with their public relations problems without handing him the promotion."

"So why do you think they promoted him?"

"They were probably afraid some reporter would notice Denif hadn't been given the customary promotion and find out he'd been penalized for trying to save a media hero. They thought that was more important than the possibility their media manipulations might get him killed sometime in the future."

"And how do you plan to deal with your feelings?"

"I'm going to go to the officers' club and spend two hours making sarcastic comments about civilian politicians. It's a military tradition. My father used to claim career military personnel had been doing it ever since the Shang dynasty was trying to fight off the Zhous."

Denif talked to a dialogue image, too. He had to spend three hours, minimum, talking to a post-combat therapy program. The conversation was completely private but the program had to report he had completed the three hours. Its report would include evaluations of his cooperativeness and his overall level of engagement. You couldn't stare at the screen for one hundred and eighty minutes.

It was a long three hours. Denif played it by the book—by the unpublished script every young officer started memorizing the day he decided he wanted to apply for Officer Training School. He had merely been doing his job. He was certain every other member of the officer corps would have done the same thing. Yes, he had been nervous and emotionally stressed. But once you started acting, your training took over. He had used the same script when he had talked to the media relations program.

The conversation wasn't that different from the media relations interview. The media relations program had spent a lot of time asking him about his thoughts when he had been trying to rescue Cam Ru. The therapy program wanted to know how he felt now that Cam Ru was dead. It kept circling back to the subject as if it was locked in an orbit.

After awhile he started filling up the time with a rote answer. "I'm a soldier," he would say. "I knew I might have to kill people when I took the oath. I tried to save her but it didn't work out. I'm sorry it didn't work out. But you have to understand things like that happen when you're involved in a combat situation."

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"Combat is a stressful, highly emotional experience, lieutenant. One-on-one combat is particularly stressful. Feelings of guilt and depression are a common phenomenon. It is generally recommended that they be confronted as soon after the experience as possible."

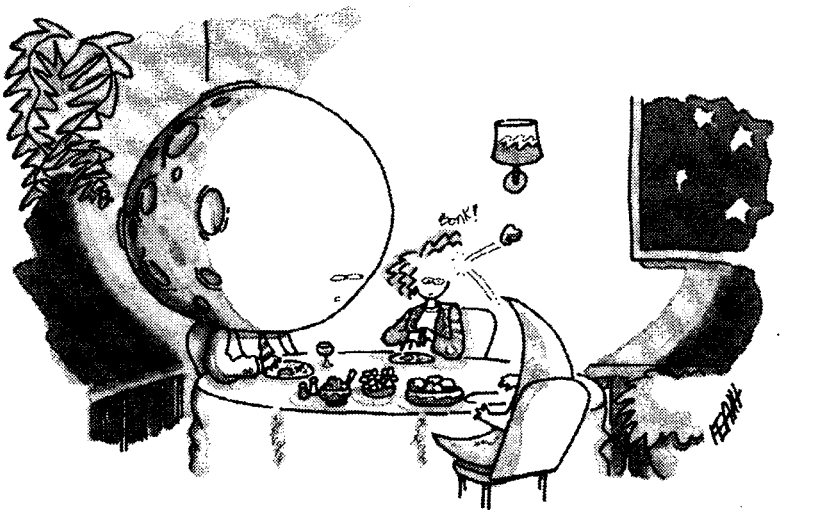
"I tried to save her and it didn't work. As far as I know, I have no feelings of guilt."

"Do you feel totally satisfied with the results of this episode? Is there anything about it that bothers you?"

"I feel I achieved all the objectives of the mission. I'm sorry I wasn't able to complete it with no loss of life, but I realize that may not have been possible. I also feel there were times when I could have acted more aggressively. This was my first experience with real combat. I believe I could have acted more decisively. And maintained better self control."

Dorothy Min would never see the recording of the therapy dialogue but she would have recognized everything he was saying. Denif was listing the standard, acceptable weaknesses young officers always mentioned. She would have recognized his next statement, too. He had used it three times in his media relations interview. Several media pundits had quoted it. One of them had decided it proved Gunnery Sergeant Wei had inaugurated a family tradition. And every time Lieutenant Major Min had encountered it, she had responded with a chill that had felt as cold and numb as the touch of a non-lethal mole.

"Next time," Denif said, "I'll just have to try harder." O



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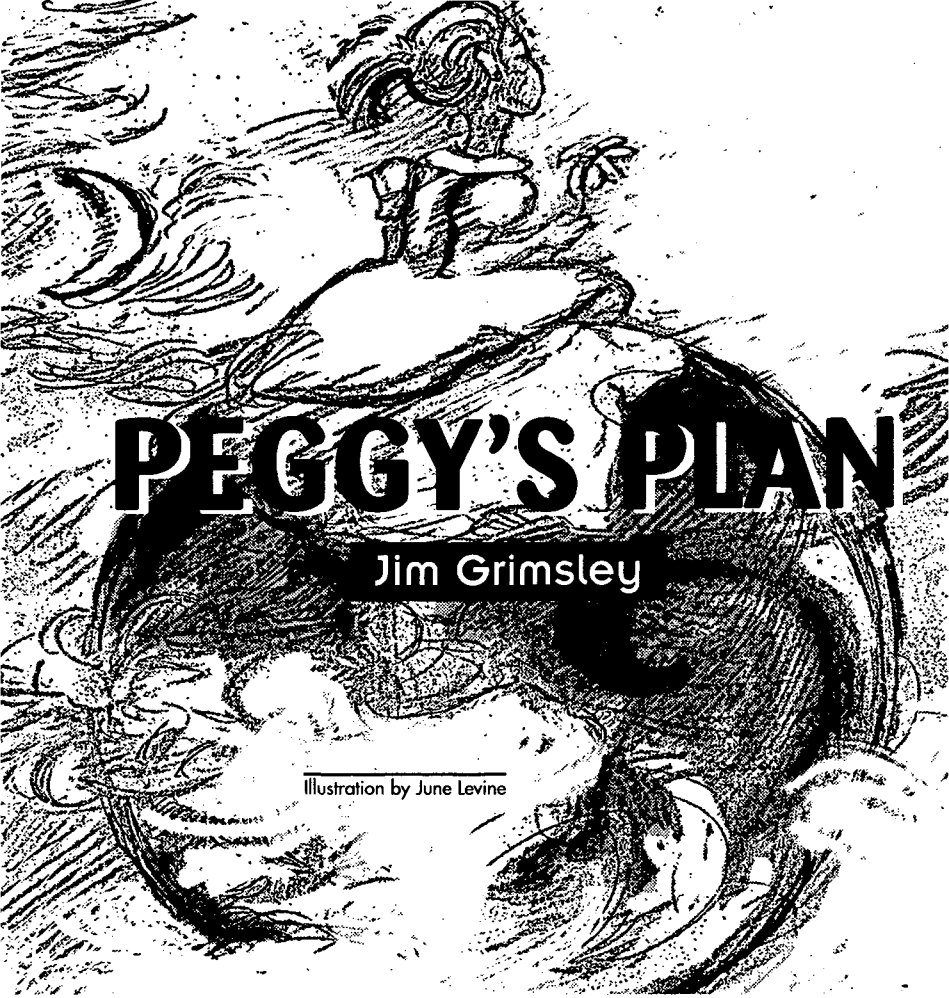

PEGGY'S PLAN

Jim Grimsley

Illustration by June Levine

Jim Grimsley is a playwright and the author of four mainstream novels, including *Winter Birds* and *Dream Boy*, whose first fantasy novel, *Kirith Kirin*, has just been released from Meisha Merlin Publishing. He has been the recipient of the Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the American Library Association GLBT Award for Literature, and the Lila Wallace/Reader's Digest Writers Award. He has also been a Lambda finalist for both fiction and drama. Mr. Grimsley's short stories have appeared in *Bending Landscapes* and *The Year's Best Science Fiction*. This is his first appearance in *Asimov's*.

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First, I would reach out to those who have been tortured. There are places where many horrible tortures are practiced, and I would go there as soon as I realized my powers. For instance, in brick buildings with no windows deep in the suburbs of Washington, DC, there are rooms with horrible torture chairs. Or in the back rooms of military ministry buildings of various nations. I would find these buildings, and, for instance, if someone had vicious metal implements shoved under the fingernails, I would draw out the implements, and I would run my fingers over the bloodied mess, and the hands would heal, and there would be no more pain. I could even erase the memory of pain from the tortured one, although this might be presumptuous.

It might take a while to reach all those who have been maimed and vivisected in the name of this or that. I would have to move in hidden ways for a while and heal all the tortured before moving on to the political arena. For instance, in the case of truly horrible tortures, like amputations or tongue-rippings or ghastly events involving the nipples, it might take me some time to heal the damage, since I am only one miracle worker. It could require some effort for me to grow back a leg on somebody who has had one cut off in an arbitrary way. This part of the healing of the tortured I will have to play by ear. But I would expect that I could pretty much solve the problem of torture within about six months to a year.

Then afterward it would be a choice between healing the sick and afflicted and the perfecting of all human governments. I have had to do a lot of thinking about this, Sister, and I do think it is important to get rid of all diseases as soon as possible. I am sure it is more important to get rid of the diseases before the poverty, for instance, but I am having trouble deciding whether it would be better to tackle the diseases right after the tortured people, or whether it would be better to go ahead and perfect the governments first. This is a matter of prioritizing.

So we will think about this for a moment. I believe it will take a lot of time to heal all of the sick, especially the ones sick with diseases that are yet unknown and unrecognized. There will be a lot of convincing of people and backing and forthing and so on. I will say you are sick, for instance, and that I need to heal you, and you will say you feel perfectly all right. Then I will say yes you are sick, because I know, and I will tell you what kind of disease you have and if you have not heard of this disease you will look at me like I am a loony. This will put up a block but I will heal you anyway, it will just take more time. When you think about how many sick people there are and you add up all the extra time, it is for sure that the problem of the sick will take some investment.

It is possible that I could just abolish all sickness at one time, with one gesture, so to speak. Like, I wave my hand and there is no more sickness of any kind. But in reality it seems to me, Margaret Ann Hammacker, that everybody will want their own individual healing and that even if I did wave my hand and abolish disease, a lot of people wouldn't believe that it was gone until I healed them personally. So I might as well go ahead and heal people of sickness the long way. It will help when I have to displace the bacteria and the like, only to have to do it a few at a time, and that will give me more time to figure what else they can do now, along with the viruses, instead of make people sick.

But I think the fact of the matter is that once I had fixed all the tortured people, I would need to go ahead and fix the governments too, or else they

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would go back to torturing people while I was healing the sick, and then I would have to start all over.

So I would probably go ahead and perfect all human governments. Then I would have some help, for instance, in rounding up the sick to heal them later, and with abolishing poverty when the time came.

The perfecting of human governments I would definitely accomplish by a visit to each place. There would be a meeting with each government and I would judge and punish the wicked and then the rest of the government would swear to follow your guidance, Sister, or else the guidance of the Alien Being. On occasion I might have to abolish a government rather than perfect it, but that would be all right. A new government would come along to take the place of the old one, and then I could perfect that government instead. I do not believe this whole job should take more than a few weeks since I will be able to take jets and visit more than one country in a day.

After that would come a long time of healing the sick and getting rid of disease. I believe this should be the topic of an entirely different paper. I would leave about two years for this.

You will agree that I have now gone a long way. Under my plan people are now free of disease and torture and bad government. This is 90 percent of the issue.

I would then pause to do something about the name "Peggy." I see no reason it should go on being the nickname for Margaret forever. I would choose a more euphonious name for myself. The name I would choose is a secret, though I did whisper it to the Alien Being the first time you introduced me to it.

A person who is going to carry out all these plans is going to see some pretty horrible things, like open sores and gouged-out eyes and disembowelments and starved-to-death babies. But I know in my heart I can be strong enough for this kind of work. To prepare myself, I have begun to watch the nightly news as well as shows like *Cops, 911, Jerry Springer, When Animals Attack,* and the surgery channel on cable. It is no coincidence that these are the only shows my dad likes to watch, besides football. He especially likes to watch the rescues on *911,* partly because of the "jaws of life." We watch them together and I no longer make faces even at the bloodiest parts, when they use the "jaws of life" to rip open an automobile accident and you see the horrible victims. I think it is good for my dad for me to spend time with him like this. But sometimes I get infected with his strange ideas and that is when I get most discouraged about the subject of fixing the whole world and everything in it.

The poverty will be the hardest part to work on, I think, because even the nicest people are willing to be rich and have more money than others. People just do not see anything wrong with having a lot of money.

For instance, when my dad sees a poor person, he is apt to spit. My grandmother, on the other hand, will spy a woman using food stamps in the grocery, and she will say, in her loud old voice that everybody can hear, "Well, she could at least use her food stamps to buy her some soap and keep herself clean. She could get her a bar of soap sure enough."

Mama says the poor you will have with you always, and I have heard Father Tilman say that too, Sister, so I wonder if it is just something people have accepted. I believe this is a question we should ask the Alien Being the next time we visit. Do they have poor Aliens on Zuta?

These are the kind of attitudes a policy on poverty would have to deal

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with. I myself would take a radical approach such as, I would equalize the money in all the bank accounts and give people extra cash in their pockets and I would erase everybody's memory of who had been rich or poor, so that, for instance, when you met a Rockefeller or a Guggenheim you would no longer secretly expect them to pay for your coffee and Danish. I believe this is the only approach that would work. And even then, watch out. People would almost immediately start getting richer and poorer than each other once again.

Maybe I could also at the same time correct people's attitudes inside their heads on this topic, but I think even a being of godlike power should refrain from altering what people think, however tempting it may be to do a nip and tuck here and there. I do hope you and the Alien Being agree with me on this.

The nice part is, once I got the whole system going, I would have more and more time to perfect things, so that, over time, I could probably make it so the poverty wasn't ever as bad as it used to be. Old folks would hang around the parks telling stories about when people were really really poor back in the old days. Not like today when everybody has it so soft. Shaking their fists at the breezes.

To summarize, the most systematic approach is the one that would work the best in terms of making the world a better place. I would first eliminate torture, then I would perfect all governments and eliminate sickness, disease, and poverty, in that order. It is possible I might have to compromise on the poverty but I would do my best. This is the most practical approach I can think of to fix the world.

I would like you please to tell the Alien Being how much I appreciate him taking an interest in us here at St. Jude's of the Rock Catholic Academy for Girls. I believe it goes without saying that I am honored to be the one who was chosen for this metamorphosis and I promise that when I am nearly all-powerful I will still be the same cheerful person. Suzanne O'Flannagan put in a good plan too and I am sorry she cannot come with me but I think the Alien Being is right, if there were two of us all-powerful ones, we would only fight. I cannot thank you enough for introducing me to the Being, and you know that I will always do my best to serve him, or her, or it, with a good spirit. (Though like I said, I do not intend to be called Peggy by just anyone; however, I will make an exception in the case of you and Father Tilman.) I hope that you will explain all this to my mother and dad. I look forward to seeing you again when we return from the planet Zuta and I begin to exercise my new powers.

Best regards,

Margaret Ann Hammacker, Ruler of Earth. ○

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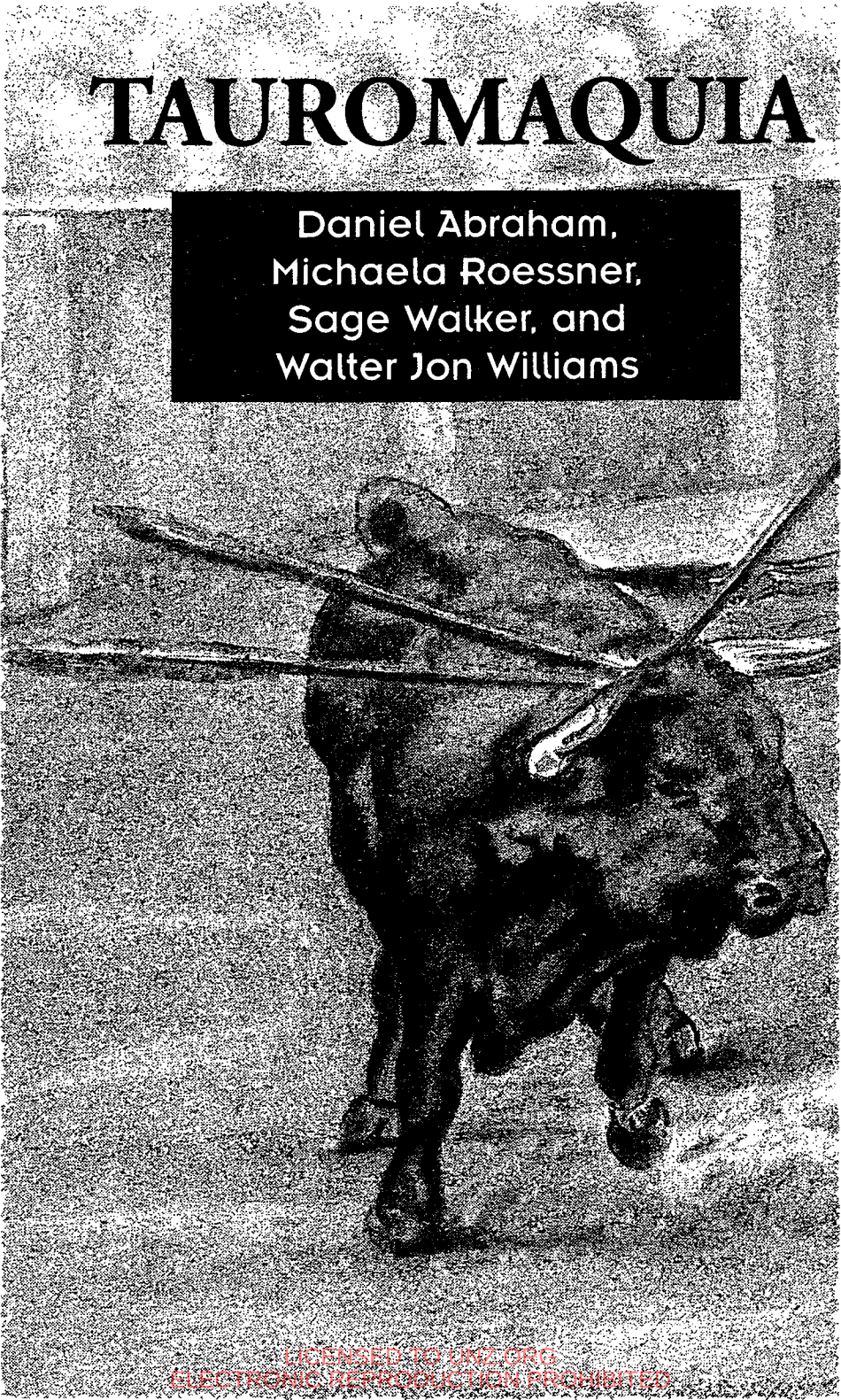
TAUROMAQUIA

Daniel Abraham,
Michaela Roessner,
Sage Walker, and
Walter Jon Williams



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Walter Jon Williams and Michaela Roessner, both of whom practice martial arts, first conceived the idea for "Tauromaquia" while discussing the far future of "Ultimate Challenge" competitions. "Once all weaknesses in the traditional martial arts have been analyzed and corrected, each art will be invincible. All encounters will end in a draw, unless the competition goes to a new level—such as, introducing the unpredictability of 'fighting' dangerous animals." Several years later the idea was revived and further developed when they were teamed up with two other writers—Sage Walker and Daniel Abraham.

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

This story previously appeared in electronic format on the web magazine Event Horizon <www.eventhorizon.com/ezine>.

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There was blood on the sand, blood from the bull and blood from the man. The man was Zhou Zhimo, Lishan's uncle, who had been gored by his second bull of the afternoon during the final moments of his faena, just before the kill, the sharp horn driving in at the thigh and up into the abdomen.

Zhimo had been taken to the hospital, and his bull had then been killed by Zhimo's great rival, Youwei of the Li Clan. There had been bad blood between the Li Clan and the Zhous for generations, and Lishan was sure that Zhimo's pain and humiliation, as he was taken from the ring, were turned to greater bitterness by the fact that it was his rival who had stepped into the ring in his place.

Li Youwei had gone on to fight his own bull then, and been injured in turn, the horn going into the calf of the leg, tearing the muscle on its way out. Youwei had finished his faena, though, had gone on with the spins and the turns, his bleeding leg immovably planted in the sand like a steel rod, and then walked up to the bull and stunned it with a hammerblow between the eyes, stunned it so that it dropped to its knees and was killed by Youwei's assistant, the puntillero who came to the bull and severed its spine with his sharp knife. Youwei was awarded an ear.

Lishan watched the encounter from behind the barrier. His heart sang to the music of the crowd, to the blood and danger and the majesty of the bulls. As his uncle's protégé, he would have to take and kill Zhou Zhimo's third and last bull for the honor of the Zhou clan.

The trumpets called, and Lishan stepped into the arena with his cuadrilla, his entourage. He wore a loincloth only, nothing that could catch the horn of a bull. The sun reflected on the oil that anointed his bronze skin. Muscles like cables wrapped his massive shoulders and deep chest, and his body tapered past narrow hips to the calloused bare feet of the bullfighter.

He had already killed many bulls for the honor of the house of Zhou, but never on the Grand Tour, never in an arena that held fifty thousand people. With his massive, calloused hands he saluted the president and the other judges and announced that he would award this bull to the head of his clan, Grandfather Zhou, a great fighter of bulls in his day. And then he and his entourage took their places for the entrance of the bulldancers, and then of the bull.

The trumpets sounded a last time, and the bull entered. He was a large black animal and he came in head high, horns sweeping the clouds. Lishan's heart sang as he saw the bull. The bull had the potential to be perfect, if only the dancers didn't spoil him.

Lishan didn't like the bulldancers because he couldn't control them. They belonged to their own clans and danced with the bull in the first act of the fight, leaping and tumbling until the bull grew a little tired and the fighter could take over for the killing. But the bulls, who had never before been in an arena, learned with every pass—they learned the bulldancers' tricks, one by one—and Lishan had to watch carefully to see what the bull learned, to make certain that he never used a trick himself that the bull had already learned from the dancers.

The bull never hesitated. He charged straight, head high, the big horns cutting left and right in search of flesh. Lishan sensed that the dancers were a little afraid.

Their fear made his own nerves sing in response.

At last the bulldancers were called out, and Lishan was alone with the

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bull. He called for the banderillas. It was usually his assistants who placed these wooden harpoons in the bull's neck, to tire him and bleed him and enrage him with pain, but this was the Grand Tour, and Lishan was good with the banderillas and wanted his moment in the sun.

He stood before the bull and cited him, drawing him in charge after charge. Three times he plunged a pair of banderillas into the bull's hide and spun away, turning his back on the horns that sought his life. The crowd roared, and the judge, as a reward, ordered the band to play. Lishan called for the cape.

He used the large cape first, the capote, and performed the classic passes: the slow and stately veronica, feet so steady they seemed nailed to the earth; the chicuelina, where he pirouetted so that the cape wrapped his body; and most dangerous of all, the mariposa, where he danced backward with the bull in close pursuit, the cape held behind him, turning the horns left and right with little flicks of the cape. Then he did passes on one knee, inviting the bull to gore or trample him; then he did the passes on both knees. Once only he had to lean backward almost to the sand as a horn sliced the air within inches of his throat.

He rose with the bull's blood spattering his chest, and called for the smaller cape, the muleta, barely larger than a handkerchief, draped over a cherrywood sword. With the muleta he made more passes, teaching the bull its destiny with every pass. He taught the bull how to charge, how to turn, and ultimately how to die.

He began to love the bull, love it for its pride, its power, and its death. It had been a fine bull when it entered the arena, but Lishan had made it a great one.

For the first time, he attacked. With calloused fists like sledges he hammered the bull's neck, tiring muscles already weakened by the banderillas. Punches to the throat cut short the animal's wind. A slashing knife-hand severed the left horn near the root. Another cut the right horn partway down its length, leaving a mangled stump that could still kill a man, and dreadfully.

At the last he cited the bull, drawing it into its last charge. He stood with the muleta dancing low before his motionless feet, and the bull lowered its head and came forward. Lishan did not move. As the bull came on he heard the crowd mutter, then roar, then shriek. At the last, he gave the muleta a little tweak to fix the bull's attention on the ground, and then he took two running steps forward and launched himself into the air.

The crowd surged to its feet. They recognized the recibiendo de patada, the most dangerous kill of all. The man would meet the bull in midair, leaping between the horns. A man could not meet a ton of charging bull and not be flung back—if he missed the kill, he would be thrown right under the animal's trampling hooves. Or he could shatter his own knee or hip with the force of the impact.

To Lishan it seemed as if he hovered in air for a lifetime. His eyes had an eternity to mark the target. His right leg drew back to his chest, timed the moment, then lashed out. The calloused heel met the bull between the eyes. There was a crack, and Lishan was thrown to the sand, helpless before the onrushing hooves.

But the bull was already dead, its skull crushed. It fell massively to the sand, its weight and momentum gouging a furrow that ended three feet from where Lishan sprawled.

As he rose there was an ache in his throat for the beauty of the bull, the

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grandeur and drama of its death. The judge awarded him both ears and the tail, and he made three circuits of the ring, holding his trophies high while the bull's blood dripped down his arms, all for the glory of his name and the honor of the house of Zhou.

Admete closed her eyes. She clenched her fists in her towel. Instead of listening to the sounds of the Fiesta Brava taking place behind her, on the other side of the barrier at her back, she tried to focus on the sounds of the other members of her clan huddled near her, or the sleek touch of Chariboea's small hands as the girl rubbed a fresh coat of oil into Admete's skin, replenishing the first application of the ointment, dried out by the arena's fine, silicate dust during the bulldancers' initial waltz with the bull.

How many years had she done the same, served the same apprenticeship? From when she was five until she turned twelve and her clan, the Montanans, let her take the bulldancer's alternativa and begin her work in the ring. Till then she'd performed the same task Chariboea performed now, that of anointing a bulldancer's skin with the pungent oil so crucial to their art . . . an oil she knew others outside the clans found rank and unpleasant, but which acted as perfume in a bulldancer's nostrils.

And, more importantly, in a bull's nostrils as well: the oil was infused with a secret blend of soothing herbs and a faint trace of pheromones. A bull, scenting the subtle melange, would come forward toward a dancer with curiosity and interest, yet not be triggered to hostility or territoriality. As soon as the bulldancers left the ring, their odor supplanted by the natural attar of testosterone and aggression reeking off the bodies of the bullfighters and their assistants, the bulls filled with a rage for charging, even before the bullfighting began.

Chariboea's hands smoothed the front of Admete's thighs, then down to just above the ankles, where the line of tattoos admonished the young girl to stop. No oil on the feet and ankles. No oil on the hands or wrists, where another set of tattoos formed the traditional demarcation. When Chariboea finished with the rest of her skin, Admete would dust rosin onto her hands and feet. When she vaulted or jumped onto a bull she needed a perfect, dry purchase. The rest of her body was as oiled as the bullfighters' and in part for the same reason—to allow as little as possible for a bull's horns to catch on.

Chariboea palmed oil over the brief cache-sex, the only garment Admete wore during bulldancing, then more oil up Admete's flat belly and across her small, heavily tattooed breasts, stretched taut over well developed pectoral muscles.

Admete shivered and smiled a crooked smile as the child's palms grazed her nipples. Bulldancers were favored, or cursed, with a reputation for sexual precocity, but Admete hadn't understood the reactions of the bulldancers she'd anointed in her childhood until she, too, began to dance, and to experience the ritual of oil.

"Turn. You must turn, Admete," Chariboea whispered in her piping, birdlike voice. "You have to turn if I'm to oil your back."

Admete didn't want to turn. If she turned she knew her eyes would fly open in response to the sounds coming from the ring. She couldn't bear to look, to see yet another of the beautiful beasts her clan, or another bulldancers' clan, had bred, raised, and at least nominally trained, sacrificed to the bullfighters' skills and the crowd's lust for ritual and blood.

"You must look," her uncle Phereboeus said, off to her side. He knew ex-

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actly why she turned away from the ring. "None of our clan wants to see, but if you don't watch the duel, then your own life may be jeopardized, when the bullfighters expect you to dance the bulls to tire them, and even to dance the bulls away from their errors. You can't send your mind away somewhere else until we're called upon to dance the beginning of the next fight."

Admete saw Phereboeus' eyes widen an instant before she felt as much as heard the crowds' vast intake of breath, and knew that at her back some callous, careless young bullfighter had committed just such a mistake in judgment. She turned, every muscle in her body instantly expectant, tuned for the inevitable pas de deux to follow, while her mind, too late, regretted its unpreparedness.

And so it begins, she thought. Why can't the life I save be the bull's, rather than the man's?

Zhou Lishan watched the fight from the middle of his cuadrilla. They muttered in muted excitement, commenting on the encounter taking place in the ring. Lishan stood in silent assessment, arms folded over his chest.

The bullfighter, the "death-bringer" of this encounter, was Li Youwei's son, Li Shuming. Li Youwei's injuries had proven to be serious: a ripped Achilles tendon, perhaps a punctured shinbone.

With his father sidelined for an indefinite period of time, at least weeks, Li Shuming was attempting to build on the growing legend of that last faena. He performed the same turns and spins as his father, with his leg planted in place in the sand, as though he'd been staked there by fate.

Lishan felt both irritated and impressed. Irritated that Li Shuming would be so disrespectful of this bull; to treat it exactly the same as Youwei's bull. Each beast posed an individual problem, deserving a solution unique only to itself. But Zhou Lishan had to admit that Li Shuming's skill had so far avoided any doubts that the crowd, at least, might have—his techniques might be the same as those in his father's last bullfight, but his style echoed rather than exactly copied Youwei's.

And the difference in the bull itself helped, made it difficult to consider the staging of this encounter a shoddy facsimile. Youwei's bull had been steel gray with horns forking forward, in build an almost classic Murieta, with a lean, deep-chested physique.

This beast, today, was brindled, broad backed with broad, outswept horns, hinting at traces of Texas Longhorn or African Cape Hunting Buffalo in its genome.

Lishan had always considered his own skills at least as great as and possibly latently superior to Li Shuming's, though it was only after his recent fight with the noble black bull that he'd enjoyed public acknowledgment that he was Li Shuming's peer. Zhou Lishan grimaced as he was forced to admit his rival's skill.

Li Shuming strode forward to finish the fight precisely as his father had, with a hammer blow between the eyes of the confusion-stilled animal. Li Shuming's pile-driver fist drove forward . . . to a massive brow no longer there. The bull had feinted him, slipping its head to the side and around as smoothly as a leaping cat.

A long, sabered horn slid from up and behind, then down into Li Shuming's back as the bullfighter lunged forward. It hooked behind the angle of Li Shuming's scapula, then lofted the bullfighter upward, over the bull's massive neck and back. Li Shuming hung for an instant, caught on the

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horn. Zhou Lishan expected to hear, in the horrified silence of the crowd, a wrenching tearing of flesh, a snapping of bone.

In some distant place in his mind, Lishan thought, Cape Hunting Buffalo, not Texas Longhorn.

Miraculously, as the bull shook its head, Li Shuming slid free of the angle of the hook at the end of the horn, then bounced once, screaming, off the bull's back, to land in a cloud of dust in the sand. As the stunned silence of the crowd gave way to tympanic shrieking, Lishan saw two bulldancers already racing from behind the ring's barriers: a youth from one side, a girl from the other.

Admete saw her cousin Pryleos run into the ring from the barrier across the arena, but she was closer and reached the bull and bullfighter first. The bull swiveled about to trample the fallen man. Admete launched herself into the air in a forward flip. High, as high as she could go, turning in mid air. Then both feet hit the ground, and up, up again. Look at me. Raise your head, my horned one. It's me you want, not the inconsequential life of the insect at your feet. She thanked the little gods of the corrida that the bull came, not from Montana clan stock, but at least from a bloodline she was familiar with, that of the Los Africanos-He'rsi clan. A dangerous genome, but one she could deal with.

The bull raised its head at her motion and scent, but then lowered it again. The animal charged forward, running over the fallen man. The bullfighter curled in on himself, covering himself with his good arm. If he could move like that, there was a good chance his injuries were minor—so far. Admete saw the bull's hoof just graze over him. The bull pivoted and regrouped.

Admete flung herself high, followed with an angled trajectory downward at the bull's side. She hit hard, pushed off into a back flip away. The bull staggered, momentarily unbalanced from its charge.

Pryleos caught up with them. He vaulted over the bull's head. Admete's heart caught in her chest as the bull lifted its head with Pryleos' motion. Her cousin landed safely, palms on the meaty muscle coiled on either side of the bull's spine. Then Pryleos flipped up and backward to land solidly on his feet well behind the bull.

A couple of men from the bullfighter's cuadrilla tried to drag the injured man away. The bull stamped over to stand over its victim, swinging its neck and threatening with horns when they approached, but otherwise refusing to move. They swung capotes before him. He ignored them. His enemy was below him, at his mercy. He needed nothing else. Admete recognized the panic spreading over the faces of the cuadrilla: the bullfighter must be rescued quickly. Even if the bull injured him no further, he could bleed to death.

Admete motioned to Pryleos. They'd only get in each other's way. Pryleos understood. He sidled over to the cuadrillas and tried to tug them toward the barriers. When they protested noisily, the bull shifted, alarmed, and stomped its hind feet up and down, sometimes on the fallen man. At the sound of the bullfighter's weak cries, his companions hastily drew back with Pryleos.

A thought pushed its insistent way to the forefront of Admete's mind. *It's all up to me now.* She pushed the thought away and began to stalk back and forth before the bull until she stood upwind from him but still firmly in his sight. She started to dance.

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She danced in a manner she'd never danced before, inventing harsh, angular, jarring motions to intersperse with the bulldancers' traditional smooth, graceful acrobatics of handstands, spins and flips. As her scent drifted toward it and her strange movements caught its eye, the bull's attention shifted. It moved toward her a little, away from the injured man.

Admete crouched, picking up the abandoned red muleta. She'd seen hundreds of bullfighters' passes, though she'd never performed one. But she knew how to dance, how to use her body. And she knew bulls as no bullfighter ever had. She caught a glimpse of her uncle Phereboeus' face and saw terrible fear for her there.

Holding the small cape before her, she flipped backward, landing in a split with the muleta flat on the ground before her. She flexed all the muscles along her inner thighs, drawing herself up to standing. The bull was drawn to the strange motion, intrigued. Admete took advantage of the opening and vaulted over his back, just as Pryleos had done. But this time the bull spun around to follow her. She danced the little cape about her lithe body, wooing the bull away from the bullfighter. The vast ruminant head, sinuous as a snake, swayed to her movements.

She dropped to her knees as she spun the cloth, performing a rodilla. Then she swirled the muleta slowly, softly to the ground. The bull, beglamored, lowered its bristled chin to graze the hot, musty sand. Admete leaned forward. She knew the vast crowd in the stands all about her thought she was performing an adorno, a garniture, like those bullfighters who made a show of kissing an entranced bull on the nose. She leaned forward further, flooding the bull's nostrils with her scent, the fragrance of her body promising him peace, protection, safety, love. She placed her hands on his horns, slid forward and twisted, in one of the earliest safety movements a young bulldancer learns, which was never intended for the bullfighting ring: the "Vaquero Norteamericano control." Her weight joined with that of his great head, neck, and forequarters at the small, precise point of unbalance, and he fell, to lie pinned to the ground. "Just a moment, my friend," she whispered to him as she raised one arm to ask for an official indulto, for her friend's life to be spared. Would the crowd jeer them both and demand death?

The masses in the stands started to scream. The sound echoed and bounced, so she couldn't make out what they were saying at first. Then the single, multi-overlayered word came clear to her: "Fenomena! Fenomena! Fenomena!"

She knew the judges could not ignore that passion. She turned her head to look at her uncle. Now in his eyes she saw relief that she was safe, and pride. But more then either of those, she saw fear and a question: *What have you done?*

That evening, the palaces of the Zhou clan were all talk of the day's fights, of the wounds that both Li and Zhou had suffered, and of the vast humiliation of Li Shuming at the hands of a girl bulldancer. The whole city seemed alive with news and speculation. Even the few for whom the fight was merely a sport took notice.

Lishan sat beside his uncle Zhimo on a stone terrace looking out over the river and the wide sky and made his report.

Zhimo listened gravely. He wore a loose linen robe of deep blue and pale yellow that hid his bandages, and his movements were slow and deliberate.

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He had lost a great deal of blood to the bull, and the damage to his leg and belly would keep him from walking for weeks. There were whispers among Lishan's cuadrilla that Zhou Zhimo might never step into the ring again. His uncle made no mention of this, only sat, listening to his nephew carefully and sipping from a cup of sweet-smelling tea.

"A good day for the bulls," Zhimo said dryly when Lishan finished his account. "Do you believe that the bull had been trained?"

Lishan considered the question carefully.

"I don't know, Uncle," he said. "It fought well, but Li Shuming was too bound up in mirroring his father. The mistake may have been genuine."

"And the girl," his uncle asked.

Lishan frowned. The thin, strong figure dancing before the beast, muleta spinning, luring it, lulling it, and then gently, gracefully taking it to the ground as quietly as rolling a sleeping child into bed.

"Perhaps the bull had been trained," Lishan said. "I don't know."

"And if so, you had nothing to do with it," his uncle said.

"Nothing, Uncle."

Zhou Zhimo nodded and put down his teacup. A serving man came to clear Zhimo's side table, and the wounded man raised a hand. The servant paused.

"You may bring them to me now," Zhimo said. The servant gathered the cup and teapot and silently vanished into the columned halls of the palace. "The Li Clan have come to have words with me. On this matter, I think. You stay, Lishan. I would have you by me. The young one will try to cite us both. Remember we are men and not beasts. Whatever dishonor you feel he implies, it is the wailing of a Li brat, embarrassed that he could not best some girl's pet bull. Nothing more. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Uncle."

Li Youwei entered first, leaning heavily on a crutch. Lishan knew enough of the wounds a bull can deal to know it was madness for the man to be walking, and yet he was here. And his son, Li Shuming, close behind him. Lishan watched the studied way the young man walked. Bruised, certainly, and his shoulder wrenched, but Lishan judged the young man only slightly hurt. And from his bleak expression, Lishan was also certain that the younger Li did not see the good fortune in his survival, only the stark pain of losing face.

"Zhou Zhimo," Li Youwei said, and offered Zhimo the salute of one martial artist to another, right fist concealed in the left palm.

"Li Youwei," his uncle replied, briefly touching fist to palm. Lishan knew that the visitors would see the perfunctory salute as an insult rather than a statement of the pain of his uncle's wounds. And perhaps, Lishan thought, they would not be entirely wrong.

"My son comes to you on a matter of honor," Li Youwei said coldly.

"The honor of your house is well known," Zhimo said. Lishan kept his face impassive despite an urge to smile. "Please bring the matter forth."

Li Shuming stepped forward to stand beside his father. He had a round face, and his body, while strong, suffered the lack of definition that seemed endemic to the Li clan. Lishan raised his chin.

"I would ask whether your house took hand in the plot against me," Li Shuming said. Lishan pressed his lips tight. The phrasing was too near accusation to be ignored. And yet when Zhimo spoke, there was no rancor in his voice.

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"Which plot is this?"

"Today's fight," Li Shuming said.

"Ah, the bulldancer," Zhimo said. "I state on the honor of my clan that we took no part in this."

"May I have your nephew's word as well," Li Shuming asked. Lishan clenched a fist at the insult. But his uncle's gaze reminded him, and Lishan nodded, tempering his anger, refusing to be cited.

"I also state so," Lishan said.

"If I find that you lie, Zhou Lishan," Li Shuming said, "honor will require that I kill you."

"Your master of etiquette has taught you well," Lishan said sweetly. "I commend him."

"What happened today was an insult to all fighters," Li Youwei said, reclaiming the floor from the younger men. "For a dancer to take up the muleta and the judges to grant her an indulto, is an outrage against us all. People will laugh at us in the streets and call us dancing girls. The man who arranged this is an enemy of the fight."

Zhimo considered the words, then took a scroll from the pocket of his robe. Lishan could see the silver seal of a bulldancer clan upon it.

"I received this before you arrived, honored Li," Zhimo said. "An apology from the Montanan patriarch. And an assurance it will not happen again. I assume you were sent the same? Perhaps were even visited in person?"

Li Youwei and Li Shuming did not reply, and their silence was affirmation enough. Zhimo tucked the scroll away again and sighed.

"What happened today was a single incident, no more," Zhimo said. "It is a story that will be retold for a few seasons and forgotten. It is nothing. Now, is there any other matter? I fear my injuries tire me." Lishan could not help but smile now. The guest should have been the one to offer an excuse.

"Forgive us, Zhou Zhimo," Li Youwei said, his voice calm and steady. "We did not mean to tax your energy."

Father and son saluted, fist in palm, and Lishan and his uncle returned the gesture. Then Lishan and his uncle were once again alone on the terrace. In the distance, the Muslim quarter's call to prayer sang like a siren. Zhou Zhimo's expression grew taut, and Lishan called for the servant to return with pain-killing tea.

"He is dangerous, the young one," Zhimo said as he sipped the tea. "Be careful of him."

"Yes, uncle."

They were silent a long moment, and Lishan knew what was in his uncle's mind. The older fighter wished that he had been there to see the girl take up the muleta and save the fallen Li. Lishan remained respectful and silent, but his mind returned to her, her shoulders, the grace and violence of her dance, and the embrace of the animal. Whatever else, it had been beautiful. He wondered if it had been false, if the bull had been trained. If not . . . if not, it had been a sight such as the ring had never seen before. And from the cast of Li Shuming's eyes, there would be an answer made for it.

Zhimo turned to his nephew and held out the scroll. Lishan accepted it. "The Montanans have always been honorable, for their kind," Zhimo said. "They offer to apologize in person, should we feel honor requires it. You are my protégé. Do this if you wish. I have no taste for it."

Lishan held the scroll in his fingers. He thought back, his heart dancing between admiration for the dancer and outrage that she should take a

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fighter's place, between suspicion of a conspiracy and the vision of the tiny, lithe girl and the bloodied bull. He wondered whether, should he demand the apology, the Montanans would send her to make it. It was not until the sun began to set that he realized his uncle slept. Lishan quietly withdrew.

The hush of early morning filled the plazas outside the bull ring. Lishan circled the patios where crowds would gather later in the day. The spectators would sip iced drinks and wait for the call of the trumpets under shady canopies of colored silks that were now rolled away, furled like sails against the carved pillars of the gates. On the river side of the huge complex, vaqueros and bulldancers worked at their morning tasks, grooming horses, polishing bits of harness, hauling grain.

An enclosed wooden chute ran from the river pier and through the bulldancer's gate. The chute was enclosed because a bull never saw a human on foot until his first encounter in the ring. The bulls were always herded on horseback. The bull gate stood open. Lishan walked in, fingering the embossed silver on the Montanan scroll he carried in his pocket.

The cavernous space under the stands was dark. A high wall surrounded the pen where the cows were kept. The bulls, when they came off the river barges, would be driven in to the cows, to be soothed and distracted while they awaited their turn on the killing sands.

This morning, the pen was being mucked out. Lishan heard voices behind the wall, and the scrape of shovels. He smelled no blood, only healthy cattle, clean grain, fresh straw, manure, and cut flowers.

Flowers?

As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, Lishan saw bouquets of them, roses and lilies and posies he couldn't name, piled in a disordered heap just inside the gate.

"For the Flower of Montana," a card's bold writing announced. "For Admete," another said. So that was her name.

The gate into the cattle pen opened and a bulldancer appeared. "Your business, sir?" The man carried a pitchfork, casually, like the tool it was, but he stared at Lishan with guarded antipathy. He was the dancer who had been in the ring with the girl, with Admete.

"Zhou Lishan." Lishan bowed slightly, as if to a trusted employee. "I would speak with Admete Montana. And my compliments to you, Montana, for your skilled assistance in the rescue of Li Shuming."

The courtesy seemed to surprise the young man.

"Thank you, honored Zhou. The hour is very early—" Lishan held up the rolled scroll with its silver seal. "—but I will see if I can find my cousin. Please forgive my caution." The tines of the bulldancer's pitchfork jabbed toward the heap of bouquets on the floor. "These are from admirers, but others are offended that the purity of the corrida was not honored. There have been threats of violence against us."

A large cart loaded with manure appeared at the gate. It was pushed by a small girl.

"You've found me," Admete said.

Such are moonlight fantasies, Lishan thought. My oiled Amazon, the sprite who danced through my restless dreams last night, is this morning's dirty child. Her eyes are red. I think she has been crying. Her boots are muddy, too.

"That's it, Pryleos," Admete told her cousin. "We're finished for now."

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Pryleos took the handles of the cart and rolled it outside. Lishan offered the silver-bedecked scroll to the girl. Admete wiped her hand on the thigh of her leather leggings and accepted it. She did not open it.

"Zhou Lishan," Lishan said, and saluted with fist in palm.

"How did you know I'd be here?"

Lishan nodded toward the scroll. "Your patriarch seems less than happy about your dance. I dared think that in your clan, as in mine, behaviors that elders find unseemly often lead to labors among the young."

Her smile, fleeting though it was, was crooked and charming.

"Phereboeus Montana has offered a personal apology to Zhou clan. I am here to claim it," Lishan said.

"Apology? Apology?" Admete stepped closer, in a way that put Lishan on his guard. He did not think she would strike him, but he couldn't be sure. Her scent was intriguing, musky, a little bothersome. "Yes, my uncle has commanded me to offer apologies to anyone who wants one. I will offer an honest apology to you, Zhou Lishan. Here it is." The tiny girl squared her shoulders and stood tall. "I am sincerely sorry I saved the life of Li Shuming."

Lishan repressed a smile, but the little minx deserved a reprimand for that. Her lack of respect threatened not just Li honor, but Zhou honor.

"Not enough," Lishan said. "Tell me. Did you train that bull?"

Lishan braced himself for a possible attack from her. Not that he feared her, of course, but he remembered the slow, inevitable fall of the bull. The girl tensed every muscle but she did not strike out at him.

"How dare you ask such a question! Surely you know that our clans depend on the corrida as much as yours! And if you would condescend to learn more about the beautiful animals you kill, you would know beyond doubt that I could not have trained him. Montanan bulls never carry Her'si genes. Her'si traits are far too dangerous."

"Her'si?" Lishan asked.

"They were milk cattle. Their bulls, although small, were crafty and fearless."

"We do not breed bulls, dancer. We fight them. The span of horn, the depth of shoulder, the proud thick necks are distractions, we are taught. We are trained to watch the danger in the bulls, not the colors of their hides," Lishan said.

"We breed the bulls to be just dangerous enough and no more. Surely you know this, Zhou Lishan." Admete folded her arms across her breasts and dropped her eyes.

"Perhaps I don't know enough," Lishan said. "I am willing to learn."

Her dark eyelashes were remarkably long.

"Then, against all tradition, I think I would be willing to teach you, although my knowledge is scant."

"Be a little easier on yourself. It was not you, Admete Montana, who fell under the hooves of the bull."

"No. No, it was not."

"Tell me. Has Li clan responded to your uncle's message?"

"No. Not yet."

"If they ask for you to make a personal apology, do so. Do so in front of witnesses. Li Shuming's honor will demand that he not seek revenge on you if your apology to him is widely known."

Admete raised her eyes. "If Li Shuming asks me to apologize in person, would you come?"

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"Yes," Lishan answered. "Yes. I would come."

"Thank you," Admete said. She held out her uncle's message. "Keep this, then, and I will be able to apologize to you again without excuse."

Perhaps it was an accident that her fingers lingered on his wrist as he accepted the scroll.

He noticed, as he left, the azure and argent Montana colors mounted above the bull gate. He had seen Admete stripped for the dance, and in rough leather. He found himself imagining how a silver gown would set off her tanned skin, how a necklace of sapphires would gleam between her breasts.

Lishan had never seen so many flowers offered anyone, though, not even his uncle.

The implications were ominous.

Lishan bowed, thrice offered the smoking sticks of incense to the god, then placed the incense in the holder below the image of Guan Di.

Guan Di, who had once been a man, who had fought wisely and nobly in fulfillment of an oath made in a peach orchard when he was young, who despite his gifts and his victories had grown old before the oath was fulfilled—who had died on campaign, a death that marked the final defeat of his cause. Guan Di, defeated in life, but now a god.

He was a good god for a bullfighter. All bullfighters knew that in the end they would lose, either to the horns of the bull or to time's slow erosion of their gift—but also they knew that immortality could be their reward, that they could become gods of the bull ring, their names remembered forever.

Guan Di's portable shrine resided now in a corner of Lishan's hotel room. The Grand Tour had moved on to Basaran, where the Zhou clan owned no property, and Lishan and his cuadrilla were lodged in a splendid old hotel of white fieldstone across the plaza from the bull ring, a hotel with a courtyard that smelled of citrus and frangipani. Despite the fact that he had not been lucky with his bulls that afternoon, Lishan gave thanks to Guan Di, then bowed again and withdrew. He showered to remove the last of the oil, sweat, and sand from his body, then dressed and left his room to pay his respects to his uncle.

In the corridor he met a messenger, dressed formally in a neat blue uniform with a tabbed collar.

"Zhou Lishan," the young man said. For a moment Lishan stared, and then he recognized the man he'd last seen carrying a pitchfork and smelling of manure.

"You are welcome, Montana," Lishan replied—he didn't know the young man's personal name.

"I carry a message from my cousin Admete."

"I would be honored to receive the message."

The message came in a cream-colored envelope, sealed with the wax image of a goddess, bare-breasted, with a snake in each hand. Lishan took the envelope, said farewell to the messenger, and while walking to his uncle's suite broke the seal.

The handwriting was as spiky and individual as Admete's personality. It stated that she was due to apologize to Li Youwei and his clan tomorrow morning, before the Grand Tour departed for their next destination. She would be honored if Zhou Lishan should attend and bear witness as representative of his clan.

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The note was proper and well-said. Lishan could attend in clear conscience, without participating in dishonor.

As he waited at the door of his uncle's suite, Lishan passed the note beneath his nostrils. To his disappointment there was no perfume, only the astringent scent of good bond paper, but the image of Admete nevertheless came to his mind, the small girl flinging herself at the bull, precariously inverted over the earth, hair whipping about her head.

Zhou Zhimo wore pajamas and a quilted robe, but he sat in his chair as if it were a throne. Colossal displays of flowers rose about him like offerings to a god. His bullfighter's pigtail had been undone, and his silver-streaked hair hung over his shoulders. He should not have taken this journey, not just a few days after a bull's horn had perforated his intestine, but pride stood between him and his pain. He looked at Lishan with fierce predator eyes.

"Did you do well, nephew?"

The question did not imply ignorance: Lishan knew Zhimo had seen everything on video. Lishan answered carefully—under the fierce eye of his uncle he did not dare evade or make excuses. This interrogation was a test of character as well as a test of knowledge and technique.

"I did as well with the bulls as I could," he said.

"What do you mean by that?"

"The first bull threw a hoof and I had to kill him quickly. The second bull was skittish—he was afraid of me, I think. I could not place him for the kill, and I had to call for the sword. The third had weak legs, but I made a decent bull of him, and the judge gave me an ear."

"You used the recibiendo de patada again. The flying kick."

"Yes. I wanted to end well."

"You did." Zhimo gave a slow, considered nod. "But you let your hopes carry you too long with that second bull. Nothing is so pathetic as a man hammering away at a bull that will not stand for his attack. You should have called for the sword earlier."

"Yes, uncle."

"Your swordplay was good," Zhimo grudged, then, "And Li Shuming? How did he do?"

"Very well. His father's style suits him. He received trophies and petitions on two of his fights. But—"

Zhimo's eyes flared. "Yes, nephew?"

"He imitates his father's style, but his body is not his father's body. He is too tall to carry the cape as high as Li Youwei. The bull can see his feet, particularly when Shuming wraps the cape around himself in the chicuelina. Sooner or later he will teach a bull to go for his feet instead of the cape."

Zhimo allowed himself a small, satisfied smile. "You noticed that? I wonder that Youwei did not."

Lishan remained silent on the subject of Li Youwei's acumen. One did not criticize a clan elder in Zhimo's presence, not even an elder of the Li clan.

"Our grand task, the very reason for our clans' existence, is to teach the people how to face death," Zhou Zhimo said. "Without fear, without flinching, and without loss of honor. It is our duty not to die as others die, screaming in terror."

Lishan remembered Li Shuming's screams as the bull hoisted him by the large muscle of his back. "Yes, Uncle," he said.

"Unless Li Shuming mends his flaw," Zhimo said, "he may teach the world a lesson he does not intend. Let us hope it is the right one."

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Lishan decided, once again, that silence was the best answer.

Zhimo looked up again. "You have seen the Montana girl? She has apologized?"

"She apologized very graciously," Lishan lied, then added, "She will formally apologize to the Li clan tomorrow, and has asked me to attend."

Surprise entered Zhimo's hawk eyes. "Why is this?"

Lishan hesitated, wondering how much of the truth to tell—and then he wondered at himself, that he should let this girl stand between himself and the truth.

"I would venture to say that she would like a witness," he said finally, "so that no blame will attach to her should she offer a proper apology and be refused."

Zhimo's eyes turned away. A troubled frown twisted his lips. "I do not like this, nephew. The Montana girl has apologized to you as representative of the Zhou clan, and that ends our involvement in this matter. Let the girl find another witness."

"But uncle!" Lishan blurted. Suddenly the hawk eyes were on him again, fierce as banderillas.

"Li has suggested that the Zhou clan is somehow involved in this disgrace!" Zhimo snapped. "Youwei spoke to my face of plots! I will not have you associate with this Montana girl, and provide evidence for Youwei's accusations!"

"I—" Lishan began, then tried a different tack. "Should we let the fears of the Li clan dictate our behavior?"

"Never!" The older man's calloused hand smashed down on the arm of his chair so forcefully that Lishan jumped at the power of the blow. "But neither will I let Zhou behavior be dictated by the willful passions of a junior member of our clan!" He pointed a trembling finger at Lishan. "I forbid you to see this girl outside the ring! Or any member of her clan! Do you understand me, nephew?"

The blood roared in Lishan's ears. Rage turned his hands into fists. But long discipline under Zhimo's fierce instruction unclenched his fists again, and brought his head down in a bow.

"I understand, Uncle," he said.

"Good." Zhou Zhimo nodded, dismissing the entire matter as beneath his notice. "Now go." And as Lishan left the room, Zhimo called after. "And when you next pray to Guan Di, ask him for better bulls!"

He would ask the god for more than that, Lishan thought.

He would have to ask Guan Di for words, the right words to frame an apology to Admete Montana.

Admete and her small entourage arrived at the conference room of the Presidente of the Corrida early for her formal apology. She guessed the Li clan would arrive late. With the typical arrogance of bullfighters in general, and the Lis in particular, they'd likely try to humble her further by making her wait. But after Zhou Lishan's warning, she realized Li Shuming might try the opposite tactic of arriving before her. That would make her appear to be the insolent one, by making the bullfighters wait. Thus piqued, he could refuse any apology she offered. She shivered. Dancers distracted bulls away from bullfighters all the time. It had never occurred to her that, no matter what the circumstances, a bullfighter would find that a reason to kill her.

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The Presidente's secretary, a wan, bespectacled young man, unlocked the doors to the conference chamber and waved a hand for them to enter. Uncle Phereboeus and the heads of the other bulldancing clans working this leg of the Grand Tour entered first, then Admete and Pryleos, and then a few of the younger clan adjutants.

Admete looked around, curious. She'd never before seen the inside of such a chamber. Bullfighters of all levels visited such rooms frequently: for ceremonies, and to work out the schedule of their appearances in the ring with the Presidente. But only the most senior patriarchs and matriarchs of the bulldancer clans were called here: to arrange for the shipment of the bulls from the ranches to the corrida, and to negotiate which clans would dance the bulls for which events.

The large windows lining one wall looked directly down on the arena. Faux half-pillars of carved tulip wood formed a visual break between the windows, then continued their march around the circumference of the room, like a well-disciplined forest. After the bank of windows ended, large vision-frames were interspersed between the ornate wooden columns. Each pictured, in a slow-motion continuous loop, a famous bullfighter during the execution of his most renowned fight.

Not a single representation of a bulldancer in a moment of glory was to be seen.

None of the glorious dances of Iphiboeus of Clan Erin, Atropos from her own clan, or the woman dancer who had most stirred her own heart as a youngster, the superlative Chryse of Clan Boedamia. Admete felt herself growing annoyed.

Pryleos and some of the other younger bulldancers had been circumnavigating the room, examining each picture. Pryleos turned to her. She knew he was thinking the same thing. His eyes sobered as he approached her.

"Admete, put this from your mind. You know it doesn't matter," he said in a low voice. "What if our clans' greatest moments in the arena *were* recorded here? It would be dishonorable, a lie, since our best work takes place beyond the corrida. We should be grateful that . . ." He broke off as the secretary opened the huge conference doors again, this time to unctuously usher in a group of bullfighters.

Admete whirled around, apprehensive. In a moment she'd face a man who wished her nothing but ill. But beneath that concern was anticipation. She'd also be watched over by another man, a man who seemed both concerned and drawn to her.

Before she'd met Lishan, bullfighters had looked almost identical; huge misshapen bodies with arms that resembled the flayed roots of great trees, backs like bulwarks, hands whose fingers swelled with broken and rebroken joints, until the cartilage bulged like tumors. Their legs, though strongly muscled, were close enough in shape to those of normal men that they looked as if they belonged on other bodies. Their thickly calloused feet caused them to walk, on any other surface than the arena's sands, as if they teetered on platforms. Admete had never been able to understand how they could move so swiftly and surely during their encounters with the bulls. But now she could see how, in the way they'd been both bred and trained for their task, they'd come to resemble the very animals they fought. And there was no creature more supple and quick, more enthralling to watch, than a fighting bull.

More men, and few tough, thick-limbed women arrived. Phereboeus and

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the other senior clan dancers began to look uneasy at their numbers. Every single one of the bullfighters wore the Li Clan's colors.

Where was Lishan? Admete felt a growing unease. A mutter rose from the bullfighters. Li Shuming entered the room slowly, one step behind his father, who shuffled forward with the aid of a single cane. For the flicker of an instant Admete felt compassion for the older man. Li Youwei reminded her of many an injured bull, dauntless, ignoring its wounds. He should be carried on a litter, or at least use a set of crutches, she thought.

Li Shuming's glare took in the whole conference room. "Where is the girl? Is she prepared to crawl?"

"We are here for a suitable apology, and no more," Li Youwei said, his voice irritated. The rumor in the stables was that Li Shuming had concocted the notion of a bulldancer clans' conspiracy to draw Li Youwei's attention away from his misjudgment in the ring. From the tone of Li Youwei's voice, Admete guessed that the older man hadn't forgotten the part his son's error had caused in the chain of events.

Phereboeus made a hasty gesture. The bulldancers lined up formally across the room from the bullfighters.

Where was Zhou Lishan? What would happen if she didn't have a witness? Zhou Lishan had implicated the whole Li clan in a conspiracy against her by saying they couldn't be relied on to bear witness to her apology, no matter what she said. Admete's legs, so supple and swift in the arena, refused to move her away from the pictures.

"What are you waiting for?" Li Shuming roared.

Admete jumped, then realized he shouted at her uncle, who was also hesitating. Phereboeus gathered himself. "The Presidente," he said calmly and with dignity. "We wouldn't want to further offend protocol without the Presidente here to be sure this affair is concluded to everybody's satisfaction."

Li Shuming folded his arms on his chest. "It's only necessary for the affair to be concluded to my and my clan's satisfaction. This matter is beneath the Presidente's notice. It's only out of his high regard for the Li clan that he lent us this room for the occasion."

Phereboeus sighed, then nodded to Admete.

Uncle Phereboeus wanted a witness too, Admete suddenly understood. And he believed it would be, should be, someone with the unassailable reputation of a Presidente of a corrida.

She stepped forward, another realization hammering in hard on the heels of that first one. Zhou Lishan wasn't coming. He'd never intended to come. Admete walked up to Li Shuming, thinking, If Zhou Lishan hadn't come to me, I would have simply made an apology here and been done with it. But he ingratiated himself, made me fear for my safety and my life. Made me think he could be trusted, that he wanted to help. But why? To what purpose? Her mind reeled with confusion, like a bull baffled by the flipping, flickering muleta. Perhaps Li Shuming wasn't that dangerous, his demands for an apology nothing more than a desire for a public salving of his hurt pride. The rancor between the Zhou and Li clans was well known. Was Zhou Lishan trying to use her in some sort of scheme against the Lis? She couldn't think fast enough to figure it out. Ideas spun through her head, a small horde of whirlwinds. In the center of each, a nascent hot spike of hurt and anger at Zhou Lishan.

"Well?" Li Shuming said.

She'd stayed up half the night concocting and rehearsing her apology

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speech, a taut confection of humility laced with flattery and admiration. Admete opened her mouth, but the whirlwinds had swept the words away.

"I apologize," she said, at last, staring straight forward to where Li Shuming's chest rose up before her like a wall.

"You apologize for what?" came the implacable voice from somewhere above her.

"I apologize for offending your honor. That was not my intention."

Admete heard a slow release of breath sough around the room, from fighters as well as dancers. That was it. That was all I needed to do, she thought with relief.

"Oh? What was your intention? I am not yet satisfied."

Don't look up at that smug face, Admete commanded herself. Don't lose your temper. She bit back the words, "my intention was to save your sorry life," and said instead, "My intention was only to draw the bull away long enough for your cuadrilla to come to your aid."

At her back she felt Uncle Phereboeus nodding his approval. In her peripheral vision she could see the expressions on the faces of the bullfighters there relax. "Why did you pick up the muleta? Why did you dare dabble in the bullfighters' art? Is your dancing so incompetent that in a panic you had to ape your betters?" came Li Shuming's scornful voice. "Or is your arrogance to blame? Did you think to impress the crowd? Or those of us whose lives are devoted to fighting the bulls? Did you not understand, silly girl, that far from impressing us, you have turned every bullfighter alive into your implacable enemy? There is not a fighter here, or in any of the other clans, who would not do everything in their power to humiliate you, to humble you."

Admete knew her cheeks flared as red as any muleta. Is that what Zhou Lishan intended? She heard the faint sound of her uncle's feet shifting from side to side with anxiety. A thought shifted just as faintly in her mind. Agree with this idiot. Just agree with him.

Those weren't the words, however, that flowed through her lips. "I picked up the muleta because it was my best chance of drawing the bull away from you. That animal was so fixed on killing you that only some sort of association with another bullfighter could have distracted him. I don't consider that I've dabbled with your art, because I didn't find it necessary to bludgeon him to death." She held up her two small, palm-calloused hands. "Nor could I have, even if I'd wished to. I acknowledge that particular skill to you and your kind. As to whether I'm competent in my art, when you can dance a bull as well as I can cape one, only then will I concede to you the right to judge me."

Her eyes met his. Zhou Lishan may have proven to be her enemy, but he hadn't lied about one thing: This man wanted to kill her. It wouldn't have mattered what she'd said. Her heart sang, glad that she'd spoken the truth.

"I do not accept your apology," Li Shuming said. He smiled with a fierce, hungry joy.

The other bulldancers formed a phalanx around Admete as they marched her back to the Montanan clan quarters. She felt a little like a prisoner. But not entirely. She could make out most of the heated exchange between her uncle and Phoenissa of Clan Erin.

"What did you expect her to do?" Phoenissa growled. "This man should be grateful to her. Instead he insulted her, and all of us, continuously, in front of his own family. The bullfighters make much of their honor and their pride . . .

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I saw no honor, and nothing for them to be proud of this day. They should be begging *us* for an apology."

"I don't argue with you on that score," Phereboeus said. "But you saw the expression on the faces of Li Youwei and the rest of the Li clan. They found Admete's words acceptable, up until the disastrous very end. They would have forced Li Shuming to accept. They wanted to be done with the whole affair, so they could shout from the rooftops that Admete had groveled before them. That would have sufficed to tarnish her public image enough."

"Is that what you want for her?" Phoenissa said, astonished. The craggy-featured woman looked over her shoulder. Admete quickly lowered her eyes. Phoenissa turned back to Phereboeus and lowered her voice. "Your sister was one of the best bulldancers Clan Montana ever produced. Would you dishonor the memory of her death by letting her daughter be unjustly humiliated?"

"I'd dishonor Briseis' memory more if I didn't protect Admete. And all of us. We have too many secrets to hide to risk drawing the bullfighters' attention to us in this way," he said, his voice somber. "But I failed. From this day forward, Admete will need more protection than only mine."

What have I done? Admete thought, with regret. Every step homeward weighed on her, until she felt leaden with remorse by the time the iron-bound oak doors of their quarters loomed before them.

Chariboea waited just inside the portal with a huge armful of dark blue and silvery flowers. "Look what came for you, Admete." Then the girl stepped back as she took in the grim faces surrounding Admete.

Admete shrugged. "More posies from more foolish admirers."

"Well, maybe," Chariboea's cheerful voice faltered. "But these were meant for luck for you today."

"Then they arrived too late," Admete said dully as she unburdened Chariboea of the huge bouquet.

"That's what the messenger said who brought it . . . that she'd been looking all over for you . . . that she'd make twice her usual wage if she could prove she reached you before you went to meet the Li clan."

Now curious, Admete pulled out a card attached to the middle of the bouquet. It was closed with the seal of a prominent merchant family in the city. She shrugged and opened it. Her gaze dropped down to the signature at the bottom. There was no name, only the words, "Sent by one who is willing to learn." Her saddened heart began to beat a little faster.

The rest of the text read: "I pray this reaches you before you go to face the demons. I cannot join you after all. I've been commanded not to come to your aid. That command alone would not stop me, but the manner of the forbidding made me realize my presence would serve only to put you more at risk, rather than aid your cause, for if I appeared assumptions would be made that your family and mine conspired together. I trust the Presidente of the Corrida, who surely will be there, will serve the same function as I intended to, and which I still consider imperative. We must meet. Send to me word of a time and place of your choosing."

Zhou Lishan hadn't betrayed her after all. Admete buried her face in the fragrant flowers. Her heart now raced, but her head ached with misery. How much of her reaction to Li Shuming's final taunting had arisen from her belief she'd been betrayed by Zhou Lishan?

The Grand Tour moved on. Admete sent no word to Lishan, nothing. She

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came to the ring for each fight but always she was flanked by at least two Montanans and always she stayed well behind the barriers. She did not dance again. Lishan could not seem to linger near the Montanans but always he found chances to seek out her face. He thought, once, her eyes met his with longing, not hatred. He could not be sure.

Li Shuming had hurt Admete and the Montanans to salve his foolish pride, true, but Lishan had damaged her more when he had obeyed his uncle and stayed away from the confrontation between Li and Montana. Flowers sent too late had not been enough.

He sent a bouquet to her every day, signed by "one who is willing to learn." When Li and Zhou stood in the ring side by side, presented with ceremony to the officials in each new city of the tour, Lishan felt a dangerous rage within him. Each time he dedicated a bull, he deceived the gods, for the name he offered was only the name his tongue spoke, while his heart said Admete, Admete.

Zhou Zhimo, recovered enough to want exercise, strolled with Lishan in the plaza in Phiri, a small city on a small island.

"You are fighting well," Uncle Zhimo said.

"Thank you, Uncle."

"Your anger at Li Shuming is apparent to me. I trust you dismiss it when you meet your bulls. It is the bulls you fight, not a foolish child of Li."

"You honor me with your trust, Uncle. It is true that clearing my mind for the bull requires much discipline when Li Shuming is at hand."

"You and Li Shuming are bringing in the crowds. The aficionados are saying you and Li Shuming are fighting as well as Youwei and I did in our youth. That may be so. But when we are recovered from our wounds, Li Youwei and I, we will still be the masters."

Indeed, Zhou Zhimo walked proudly and seemed at ease on his feet. Lishan could not help but see the discipline required for him to do so, and the bead of sweat on his uncle's upper lip. They reached the edge of the plaza. The hotel was near.

"Another thing, nephew. I am no longer an invalid. Phiri loves its bulls, and its daughters love bullfighters. Go and find distraction, Lishan. I am tired of the sight of you."

"Uncle!"

"I mean it, Lishan. Go."

Startled, Lishan bowed in obedience, thinking, you randy old goat, I have no interest in the comforts of courtesans. My dreams are only of a nimble dancer with dark hair and calloused hands. Lishan watched Zhimo climb the steps into the hotel.

Seek a woman, indeed. The empty afternoon stretched before him. There was only one flower seller in Phiri. He would go there, and then try to think of something to do. Sight-see, perhaps. Drink a glass with Chen Yuenkai, maybe. Yuenkai was a good man, whose fights were not getting as much attention this season as those of Lishan or Shuming.

Yes, he would go to the Chen lodgings after he sent today's flowers to Admete. Lishan sighed deeply, breathing in the hot flinty air of the sad little town of Phiri.

"Ssss," he heard. A dark-haired child in a blue tunic darted out of the shadow of an olive tree and clutched at his hand. "Lishan," she whispered. "Zhou Lishan, come with me!" She tugged at his arm. Her grip was remarkably strong for her size. "Admete is waiting. Lishan, come now!"

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The child tried to pull him down the steep street.

"Admete? Of course I will come!" Lishan said. "Let go my arm!"

Phiri was actually the loveliest of tiny cities, he saw, and this was the most wonderful of days, all bright sun and early summer heat. He laughed as the child skipped down the hill before him, bouncing over curbs and broken stones with all the skill of a chamois kid.

The city's small harbor held an assortment of fishing boats painted in reds and oranges, and one silver seaplane. The child led him to the rickety jetty where the craft was moored. An unseen pilot started the engines.

"Get in. I'll cast off," the child said.

The spin of the props tugged the little craft seaward. Lishan jumped for the plane's door. Inside, the pilot, Admete, wore the strange scent he remembered. Her strong small hand reached to steady him as he thumped into the righthand seat. He thought the plane might be noisy for private conversation.

Admete smiled her crooked smile at him and it was more charming than he had remembered. The child leaped from the jetty into Lishan's lap, the bow line clutched in her hand. It seemed the conversation would not be private. So be it. As Admete taxied the plane for open water, the little girl stood between Lishan's legs, fastened the line onto something above the door, and climbed over his shoulder to one of the back seats. Her skin, Lishan noticed, carried a trace of the same scent Admete wore.

"Latch the door," Admete called above the roar of the engines. Lishan did.

Admete took the little plane up in a wide spiral, circling the harbor and climbing fast. Sunlight struck copper spangles from the wavelets beneath them. The water of the harbor changed from turquoise to near black as it deepened. A man on the deck of a white-sailed yacht, tiny at this distance, waved up at them. Admete gestured toward the girl in the back, who had donned headphones. "Chariboea found you," Admete said in a normal tone of voice.

The girl took off her headphones. "I found him. I forget my manners. I am Chariboea Montana, honored Zhou Lishan."

Lishan offered her a slight seated bow.

Chariboea smiled, bobbed her head, and clamped her headphones back on.

They left the island behind them and flew toward the coast of the peninsula, beautiful from here, pale beaches backed by rectangular fields, the broken silhouettes of high mountains beyond.

"I am at your service," Lishan said, "but might I ask where you are taking me?"

"Uncle wants me to bring some supplies from the estancia," Admete said. "I thought you might like to see it."

"I will be delighted to see it."

"You know I would have answered your note if I could. I have been kept under close watch, Zhou Lishan."

"I knew it. I saw you guarded behind the barriers."

"The estancia is not far inland. You don't mind, do you?"

"No. My afternoon is free." He wondered if Chariboea had watched him mope about with his uncle in the sad days past. Of course she had, he decided.

"You have not been dancing the bulls," Lishan said.

"No. Uncle thinks it not wise. He wants me seen, lest we appear to cower

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to Li Shuming, but Phereboeus will not let me dance. It hurts me not to dance, Lishan."

"I am sorry, Admete. I am sorry I did not come to you when you needed me. Perhaps I could have spared you this."

"Oh, Lishan, not all of this is your fault! I have caused so much trouble! I answered you so sharply that morning! I regret that deeply! Then I let Li Shuming cite me as if I were a yearling bull, and I knew better, knew I could have humbled myself without dishonor. I am such a fool!"

"You are not! You are, rather, a marvelous dancer who has saved a fool's life. Li Youwei is hurt more than he lets us know, I think—there are stories that it wasn't just the tendon that was gored, that the horn punctured the bone and that it got infected. It is not like him to permit Li Shuming to behave as badly as rumor says he behaved."

"There were no recordings of the meeting, then."

"It seems the cameras did not operate that morning."

"I suspected as much when the Presidente was not there."

"Li is disgraced by this matter of the cameras. It is unworthy of a fighting clan. But Admete, we can hope things are not as bad as they seem. Li Youwei will heal, and Li Shuming will find something else to upset him, and this will pass."

"I hope so."

They said nothing for a time. Lishan did not know if Admete was silenced by the droning of the engines or if she mused on her troubles. They were real enough, and he could think of nothing he could do to help her. The Montanans guarded her, and that would have to be enough for now. The plane crossed the last of the cultivated land and kept climbing.

"See the lake?" Admete asked. "That's the estancia."

The lake nestled in an alpine valley. Barns and corrals and a rambling, low house bordered the water. One road switchbacked toward lower ground. Small meadows dotted the timbered shoulders of the mountain. Higher still, raw granite cliffs rose above the timberline, their fissures crusted with old snow, their faces bathed in sunset golds and reds.

Admete brought the plane low over the lake and then lifted it again. "Uncle will ask me which herds are in which pastures," she said. "Chariboea?"

Chariboea took off her headphones and wedged herself between Lishan and Admete. "Okay. I'm counting."

Admete kept the plane at what she seemed to feel was a comfortable height above the trees. The distance was less than Lishan might have chosen, but then Admete knew these forests well. Or so Lishan hoped. They swept low over empty meadows, rose again, dipped close to other pastures where herds grazed, smaller herds than Lishan expected, twenty or thirty head at most. They found a herd of yearling bulls, one of cows and calves. He saw no fences and no herders. He saw a fine and large eagle circling the crags. In one meadow, a giant bull, heavy of horn and lame of gait, grazed alone.

"Thirty-four," Chariboea said after they had located the fifth herd. "That's all of them."

"Good," Admete said. They circled high and came back to the lake. Lishan felt a little dizzy.

As the plane began to descend, two tiny riders appeared from beneath the high timber. They cantered across the lakeside pasture, heading for a tie-up at the water's edge. They rode as if born on horseback. Admete turned the

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plane and Lishan saw them in profile. The long shadows they cast on the meadow were strange indeed. Lishan tried to get a better look as the plane sank toward the lake, but Admete banked the plane sharply on final approach and the wing hid the riders from his view.

The landing disturbed the still waters of the lake and sent ripples into the tall reeds at its edge. Admete taxied to the tie-up where the riders waited. She cut the engines. Chariboea scrambled over Lishan again, opened the door and threw the line to one of the creatures. Lishan noted that this time Chariboea used a step mounted below the door to get ashore dry. By the time he had disengaged himself from the plane and followed her, the horsemen, if you could call them that, were gone. Chariboea ran into the meadow and ducked down to pick lupines.

Admete, ashore and standing beside his shoulder, said, "They are shy around strangers." She carried a flask in her hand. "Lishan, I betray secrets by bringing you here. And I put Chariboea at risk, too."

"I will see only what you want me to see," Lishan said. "If you choose, I will not have seen centaurs come from the forest, only horsemen."

"The . . . people . . . in our high pastures are discreet. If you will allow me—" She held up the flask. "You will not seem a stranger if you smell as you should. Your back first, please."

He was taller than she was, so he sank to his knees for his anointment. The oil was warm and pleasant on his shoulders. Admete kneaded the muscles of his back as she worked, and that was pleasant, too. "I think this stuff smells better on you than on me, Admete."

"Thank you. Lishan, those are fine trousers. I would not want to oil them, I think, and it is not our custom to wear much here unless we are cold."

Lishan stood and pulled off his trousers. Admete worked her way down the small muscles of his back, brushed oil over his cache-sex, massaged the pungent scent into the large muscles of his thighs. He stood still for her and watched Chariboea, who seemed to be studiously ignoring them, plait flowers into a garland. A small herd of cattle wandered into the meadow. The lead cow, as red and shiny as polished mahogany, wore a deep-toned bell around her neck. Cows and half-grown calves followed her.

"We're on foot," Lishan said. "I thought—"

"These are not fighting bulls. The herders will not let them into this pasture while we are here."

Chariboea finished her garland and brought it to show him.

"It's well done," Lishan said.

"It's for you. Sit down, please. I'll take down your braid."

He knelt again. Chariboea's fingers worked deftly through his braid, loosening and scenting his hair. She crowned him with lupines and sat back to admire her work. Admete stripped off her shirt and trousers, leaving her dressed only in a bulldancer's briefs. She poured oil into her palm and handed the bottle to Lishan. "Your chest, too. All of you." She massaged the oil into her own shoulders, over her breasts. Lishan suddenly thought he would like to help her, but he couldn't reach past Chariboea, who was rubbing oil on his stomach and whose knees and elbows were definitely in the way. The cattle moved closer, lowing as they came. Admete sat with her legs crossed and worked oil into her ankles. A calf bumped its nose against Chariboea's back. The girl giggled and rolled away and onto her feet. She shoved the calf aside, leaving an opening for the lead cow, who pushed her way forward and stopped just short of Lishan's nose.

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"They like the scent," Admete said. She stood and hugged the lead cow's massive neck. Lishan had generally found being on the ground and near the feet of bovines unfortunate. He was happy to stand when Admete did.

"Say hello, Aster." Admete did something to the big cow's ear and Aster nodded, once, again. "I have brought Lishan to meet you. Where is your big boy? Where is Ephoros?"

Lishan looked across the massed backs of the herd to the edge of the pasture. "I think he's coming."

He was a prince of bulls, a young lord of bulls. He was far larger than his mother, almost but not quite too large for the ring. He was glossy black, even his muzzle black as the belly of a storm, and his horns, painted from root to tip with stacked rings of silver and blue, could have pulled up trees with a casual flick. His chest was deep, his neck a buttress of fine muscle. His eyes were as large and golden as shields stolen from ancient tombs. The tuft on his tail would have befitted the most kingly of lions. He ambled toward his herd with a possessive, royal interest. He was magnificent.

And he stopped and took note of Lishan. Lishan had no cuadrilla at his side, no sword to use if things went badly. There were no gates here, no barriers. He wondered if this was a test Admete set for him. If so, he would do his best to meet it.

The bull lifted a hoof and pawed the grass. It was painted blue and silver as well.

"Oh, silly Ephoros," Admete said. "Stop that."

The bull shook his horns. It was only a minor challenge as yet, but Lishan found he wanted to meet it. Admete left the herd and walked toward the bull, murmuring as she went, gentle endearments that Lishan wished had been meant for him. Chariboea and her calf had moved aside, between the bull and the herd. She was currying her little bull calf's flank and paying no attention to Ephoros at all, it seemed. The bull took a step toward Admete. Chariboea turned so that the calf was between her and the bull. Perhaps she was not so unaware of him after all.

Admete stood in front of the bull, her hand extended. He licked at something she held in her hand. She laughed and scratched at his dewlaps, and then turned her back to him. He followed her toward the herd, his head low, as docile as a hungry calf. The cows, sensibly enough, moved away from the bull's approach. Lishan decided to stand his ground. Not to challenge this pet bull, of course, but he did not feel that hiding in the midst of the herd was altogether the honorable thing.

Aster, with a low moan that sounded almost exasperated, firmly shouldered him to one side and took a stance between Lishan and the bull. In a moment, he was surrounded by a solid wall made of cows.

"She has adopted you. Good old Aster." Admete worked her way between the cows to Lishan's side, leaving Aster and the bull to stand nose to nose, engaged in some sort of communication Lishan could not read. Admete took Lishan's hand and held it firmly. Her palm was gritty in his. "This is a school, Lishan."

"What is the lesson?"

For answer, she led him through the herd, past Aster's guard, and held their clasped hands out for the bull's inspection. He snorted and dipped his muzzle, licking their hands with a tongue that would have done well as a metal file.

"Salt," Admete said. Ephoros sampled the back of Lishan's forearm. "I

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guess he likes your salt, as well." She shoved the bull's head away. Satisfied for the moment, or perhaps answering some signal from Aster, he ambled off.

"Does etiquette permit me to clean my arm?" Lishan asked.

"Yes," Admete said.

"Thank you." Lishan pulled up a fistful of grass stalks and wiped the slime away. When he was finished, he gave the stalks to Aster.

Admete's smile told him it had been the right thing to do.

"Do you have other lessons for me?" he asked.

"If I were to train you as a bulldancer, I would say, watch. Listen. But you are doing that."

"I will watch and listen."

The meadow was peaceful. Aster permitted the two humans to leave the herd. Chariboea finished with her bull calf and turned her attentions to a different one, a feisty little piebald. They butted each other for a while and seemed to enjoy it. Lishan fell into a dreamy state, happy within the reality of the woman beside him, who was real and fragrant and calm. They wandered the meadow together, sought the shade of trees, moved back toward the waning sun to watch it sinking. The only sounds were of breeze in the grass, the occasional sigh of the trees, the random chiming of Aster's bell as she shifted from one patch of sweet grass to another.

"It's late. I should load the plane," Admete said.

"Yes."

They walked slowly toward the house, following Chariboea and the piebald calf, who played a sort of chase, one and then the other, trailed by the herd and by Ephoros.

The herd stopped at a certain distance from the house. If there was a barrier, Lishan could not sense it. Admete led him under eaves, through a wide doorway, into a room that smelled of hay and herbs. A wide table stood against one wall. No chairs, and the table was the height of Lishan's chest.

"I'll get food for us and we can eat outside," Admete said. "That would be pleasant." And the centaurs could have their meal undisturbed, Lishan sensed.

Chariboea came in. She followed her cousin into one of the inner rooms. The house seemed silent and Lishan wondered who, if anyone, was in residence.

Admete returned carrying the strap of a backpack in one hand and swinging a bota in the other.

"May I?" Lishan reached for the backpack. Admete handed him the bota instead. He slung it over his shoulder and followed her to the plane. So quickly, the last rim of red sun had vanished and left the lake dark.

Admete stepped into the plane and was quickly out again. Her backpack did not seem to be much lighter. "He only wanted a record chip. I think Uncle meant to cheer me up, sending me here. The records could have been mailed to him. Would you mind a bit of a hike, Lishan? There is a pleasant place to eat, if we climb a little higher."

He was starving. "I will climb," Lishan said.

He followed her beneath dark pines, up a steep path, up the face of a cliff. Steps and handholds were cut in it, convenient but irregular and unlikely to be noticed from below. He knew his muscles would never forget the flex and stretch of this walk through gathering darkness. His feet would always remember the rough warmth of these stones that still carried some of the

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day's heat. His eyes would always be able to recall this perfect pine cone nestled in fragrant needles, this sudden glimpse of the rising moon. When he was ancient, he would remember the sound of each breath Admete took as she led him up, and up.

Admete waited for him on top of a ledge. When he reached her, she took his shoulders and gently turned him away from her, so that he looked out and down.

Beneath the ledge, an oval meadow sheltered against the side of the mountain. It was guarded on three sides by tall pines, edged on the west by two towering cones of natural stone. Framed between the towers, forested slopes stretched down toward silvered meadows, the onyx gleam of the lake. At the horizon hung an evening star as large as Lishan's fist, and above it rose the divided disc of the waxing moon.

He stood entranced. There were no words for this place. And then he saw the towers for the mighty horns they were.

Lishan had no incense to offer. He bowed deeply, three times, to the altar below him.

Admete quietly slipped the straps of her backpack off her shoulders and busied herself with it. Lishan knelt to help her.

"Our infants are brought to the fields still wet from birthing so that the cattle can take their scent. When the children are as tall as the shoulders of a newborn calf, they are taught where they can step and where they cannot. They learn how to stay safe in the pastures. The skills of dancing the bulls are much like the skills any dancer must learn. And they must be learned early in life."

Admete spread a blanket on the ground and laid out small packages that smelled wonderful. Admete looked most fetching, a dark statue on a white blanket, sitting formally with her feet tucked beneath her. "Eat now, Lishan. This is an ordinary night here, not a festival, and the children are not here yet."

He sat facing her. He opened the bota, raised it in toast to her, tilted his head back to drink. Lishan expected a rough peasant wine but the taste of this was supple and delicate. He lifted the bota high for his second swallow, letting the stream of black wine arc down to his opened mouth.

"I wouldn't do that unless you think we want company," Admete said. "The centaurs are fond of wine." She took the bota from him and drank deeply.

There were dolmades wrapped in summer leaves that tasted of citrus. They were richly stuffed with pine nuts and scented with wild thyme. The cheeses were well aged and mellow, the olives large as plums. The bread was pleasantly tough of crust and tender within.

Lishan's appetite was not delicate, but Admete seemed as hungry as he was. She held something between her breasts, he noticed when he lifted his head from his food.

"These taste best when they are warm from the sun." Admete leaned forward and her fingers found his lips. Warmed, soft fleshed, slightly furred, a sweet hollow within, the pitted fruit was heaven in his mouth.

Lishan cried out in pleasure and pulled her to him. Her lips were as soft as the apricot had been. Her ears were most delicate, smooth as mother of pearl beneath his tongue. Her hands twined in his hair.

And from the meadow below came laughter, a jaunty melody played on something like a flute, a stamping of heavy feet. Admete twisted away from

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his arms. "They don't dance all night," she whispered. "It won't be long." She was as breathless as he was, and it pleased him greatly, "Soon."

"Soon," he replied, but she was too far away. Lishan pulled her close so she could lean against his chest, so that he could trace the soft skin of her forearm with his fingers and think of satin.

It was indeed a school, he saw, with stripling boys and a handful of girls near Chariboea's age for students. A pair of motherly women attended them. The students formed an irregular line, facing, not the great horns, but the edge of the forest. Lishan watched a boy tug a girl's hair. The girl managed to reply in kind without being seen by the grownups. The women conferred in low voices.

"Here." Admete handed the bota to Lishan. He drank.

Alone, a bull stepped from the forest to face the children. He was old and big and dark, but the painted rings on his horns were easy to see, a man-made pattern of silver that would show even in less light than this. Behind the bull, Lishan thought he saw the gleam of a centaur's bare chest.

"The herders stay near," Admete murmured. "Old Rhadamanthus is usually very patient, but if a child should do something foolish—"

A boy stepped out to meet the bull, a sight to be seen in any ring, certainly, except that at the opposite end of the clearing centaurs whirled long cords above their heads, fitted with tubes that caught the wind and droned like giant bees. A drum sounded a stately rhythm and plaintive harmonies played on pan pipes skirled above it all. The pacing of the bull, forward, aside, forward, opposite, matched the beat set by the unseen drummer.

"It's not the drum the bull follows," Admete murmured. "Watch the boy, Lishan. Watch him."

Spin, step, spin, step, the curve of the boy's arched back exactly—there—at each of the drum's beats and the bull's attention on it.

Lishan felt Admete tense and straighten in his arms. "Ephoros is so young. If I had known he was to be danced tonight, I would have worked with him this afternoon."

Chariboea led the beautiful young beast into the ring, into the rhythm, dancing him with sharp, angular movements that matched the boy's. The drum beats were louder now, the rhythm faster. Two bulls in the same ring was madness, with the tender limbs of children within reach, with the excitement of the wild youngsters in the air.

In stately steps, the bulls circled each other, were circled by spinning dancers, were drawn apart.

To stand, patient as statues, flanked by a child near each horn, while lithe young bodies danced before the bulls, leaped over them, wheeled and circled around them.

Ephoros flicked an ear at the older bull. Chariboea saw it and suddenly her thin young body was between his gaze and the eyes of the older bull. Lishan blinked. In the next instant there were centaurs in the ring, dancing with gay abandon, it seemed, but the bulls turned for them, step by step, until the older bull and the younger one stood side by side before the great horns.

Admete gave a sigh of relief. "Chariboea—" Admete hushed as the drums fell suddenly silent. The bulls wheeled at some unseen command and vanished into the forest. Within minutes, the children were gone as well.

"Chariboea made a mistake. Did you see it, Lishan?"

"No."

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"Just as well. I'll speak to her about it later. I doubt she even knows what went wrong. So, the dance is over."

"Is it?" Lishan asked. "I thought we might begin another."

"Sometimes the penalty for a misstep in the dance is death, Zhou Lishan."

"And not to dance is to die inside."

"You are beautiful."

"I am your student. Teach me."

Her arms were around his neck. "I love you. But I see blood on your hands when I look at you."

"You sent me a message sealed with the image of a goddess. She had life in her belly and milk in her breasts." He stroked the muscles of her back. The white blanket was soft enough beneath his shoulders and the night was cold. He drew a corner of the cloth up to shelter them.

"Yes?" Admete asked.

"And she carried serpents in her hands. Death is a part of life, my love."

"Don't speak of death!"

For a time, he was unable to speak at all. The stars wheeled above them. He wanted to smell the clean scent of pine on the night air, forever. He wanted the sweet struggles of their entwined bodies never to end.

Lishan buried his face in his lover's hair. "I don't know what to do," he said.

"About what?"

"If you were a Chen or a Liao, I would know to ask your clan elder for your hand. Who speaks for you, Admete Montana?"

"How awful such a custom would be! I speak for myself, thank you."

"I would marry you, Admete Montana."

"Would you?"

"I want you beside me. Always." Even if the bull ring was lost to him forever. Even if he spent the rest of his days in this forest. Even so.

She raised her face and stared up at him. "I am not a fighter."

"You are a dancer. You wanted to dance Ephoros tonight. I sensed it."

"I could not bear to leave you." She looked away, seeming suddenly shy. "I speak for myself. But there is an old custom you could follow if you wish. You would visit Phereboeus, since my mother is dead, and you would offer him a packet of salt and a fine halter for a bull to wear. To thank him for my upbringing, you see."

"I will do that. I will go now." Lishan feigned a struggle to get up and start down the hill.

"I think not!" Admete said.

He lost the battle, as he knew he would. He lost several battles more. He felt at times that he was being danced like a bull. The feeling was wonderful.

Perhaps there were watchers in the forest. Perhaps he heard cautious hooves step near and then away.

When Chariboea waked them, far too early, and Lishan picked up the bota, it was empty.

From behind a tall spruce, he heard, most definitely, the sound of a hiccup.

The Grand Tour entered its final phase, the long curve around the coast. Each day's fighting brought the end of the season visibly closer. It was clear from the talk in the streets and on the networks that Li Shuming and Zhou

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Lishan stood in close competition to be recognized by the Presidente of the Corrida as the best of season. A few talked of Chen Shouxin coming from behind to take the honor, but to most this seemed unlikely. The drama of the two houses in bitter rivalry, two master fighters injured badly and their protégés bearing the honor of their names had a symmetry that fired the minds and imaginations of the people. And drama, as much as skill, was the soul of the fight.

The tense excitement and speculation might have been talk of the weather for all it meant to Lishan. But if he seemed distracted at other times, his performance in the ring was impeccable. It was as if, some people said, he had suddenly gained a deeper understanding of the bulls. It happened sometimes. A young fighter would have an insight into the nature of the beast and his style would undergo a change. Zhou Lishan was tiring the bulls less, frustrating them for a shorter period. His kills came so quickly the crowds would gasp, amazed that he would dare make the attempt when the bull was still so strong. With each fight, the people said he seemed more and more to face the bulls as an equal, as if he were becoming a bull himself. If he seemed to take a degree less joy in the slaughter, it was perceived as the maturing of an artist, less interested in the crowd than in the work that he had already finished when the cheering began.

Li Shuming, on the other hand, was a man keenly aware of his audience. His style had improved throughout the tour, and now, in the final stages, his talent was blooming. Li Shuming's fights were baroque compared to his rival's. He would play the bull's emotions and frustrations with the grace and cruel wit of a drawing room comedy. Twice in the tour, he had brought the crowd to its feet in applause before the bull was dead. And if his technique was not perfect, if he seemed a little over-fond of his chicuelina, it seemed only to add to the crowd's pleasure, heightening the sense of danger and possibility. If Zhou Lishan was growing into an artist, Li Shuming was becoming a showman.

Lishan sat, weary in his seat, as the crowd roared again, delighted by Li Shuming. He did not bother to watch. Instead, he wiped the oil from his skin with a cloth and began to dress. He had business today outside of the ring. As soon as etiquette allowed, he escaped. The tour had reached Dairan, a large city known for its artists and the quality of its leather. Lishan had written ahead, arranged things, and today he could collect the work he had commissioned.

The city streets were wide and clean. The air smelled of cumin and pork from the street vendors and under that the subtle scent of the ocean. People recognized him as he passed through the markets and trade plazas. Once a young boy, hands pressed to his temples and fingers extended like horns, rushed at him. He bounced off Lishan's leg to the amusement of the others on the street. Lishan took it with the best grace he could, but pressed on, impatient. It had been two weeks, almost, since he had lain with Admete at the estancia. He had contrived to see her three times since then, but always briefly, furtively. He feared that Zhou Zhimo would guess his intentions and forbid Lishan his lover's hand. If that happened, the house of Zhou would be soiled by the scandal of Lishan's disobedience. It was better to be quiet until the wedding could be presented as a thing already complete.

The shop Lishan entered was not in the best section of the city, and the door was old and warped. There was no sign to mark it, but as soon as he

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"You've been researching this, haven't you?" he asked dryly.

She laughed. The day was lovely, and the sunsets in Dairan were stunning. Admete looked forward to sitting on a low hill somewhere outside the city with Lishan's head in her lap as she watched the clouds blush and shimmer. Nothing, she thought, would break her delight in the world and everything in it. Not even Li Shuming beating an animal to death on the other side of the fence.

"Be happy with me, cousin," Admete said. "Be glad. This is what I'd hoped. Better than I had hoped. He's . . ."

"He's a killer," Pryleos interrupted. "Whatever else he is, he is a killer. And we are not, cousin."

"Yes," Admete said. "You're right. He is. And we aren't. But I love him. And I will be with him."

Her voice had lost its playfulness, and at last, Pryleos looked to her. She could read regret in his expression, and perhaps a little fear.

"He is not of our clan," Pryleos said. "He's not even of our class. Think of everything that you will have to keep from him, Admete. The herders. The training of the bulls. The pact of Arias. How can you live a life with a man when every word has to be weighed? What kind of marriage is that?"

The cousins gazed at each other steadily. Again, the crowd roared, but Pryleos didn't turn to look.

"It won't be a problem," Admete said.

"No?" Pryleos asked, skepticism and sorrow in his tone.

"No," Admete said. "I've already shown him. Well, not the pact, but the herders. And he's seen a bulldance at the estancia. And I will tell him about the pact, when the time comes. There won't be a problem with secrets. There won't be any secrets."

Pryleos' face went ashen, and he leaned more heavily against the fence. Admete looked away, her gaze on the crowds.

"I believe in him, cousin," she said. "And I'm right."

[redacted] were silent throughout the remainder of the fight. Admete wondered if she had gone too far. Not in showing Lishan the secrets of the estancia—she couldn't bring herself to regret that—but in telling her cousin. Showing Lishan so much would appear to be a terrible risk to someone who [redacted] know him. But somehow in the scent of flowers and the earnestness [redacted] grown sure of him, and she still was. And so was Aster, [redacted] thought. Pryleos and Euberos would learn to trust him, given time.

The judge awarded Li Shuming both ears and the tail. The crowd rose to its feet, clamoring as the fighter strode around the sand, drinking in their approval. Pryleos and Admete waited in silence. The spectators would stream out [redacted], into the plazas and onto the streets. The merchants who had been lucky or clever enough to get street permits this near the arena would be selling wine and meat. There would be music, Admete knew, and celebration. Men would fight each other, too excited by the slaughter they had seen to behave. The bulldancers were not a part of this. Instead, they would be cleaning the stables, tending to the bulls that had not been killed yet, and preparing either for the next day's fight, or the labor of moving the [redacted] to its next venue. This absence from the festival outside the ring was [redacted] bulldancers' professionalism and humility, [redacted] among them all to encourage the misap-

[redacted] crowd to thin, the arena to empty, she reflected

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entered the high, thin rooms, he knew he had found the right place. The scent of good leather and expensive incense mixed in a perfect balance. It was the studio of a man in love with his materials, in love with beauty.

"Zhou Lishan," an old man said from the shadows above him. Lishan peered up into the loft as a wizened form clambered down a thin wooden ladder. "I wondered whether you would come."

"Renz Myer?"

The old man blinked bright eyes impatiently and nodded.

"This way," the old man said and strode through the clutter. Lishan followed him.

The harness sat on a workbench, glowing in a shaft of natural sunlight. The wood was dark and smooth as glass, the leather fine and rich. The lacework where leather met leather was so delicate Lishan could barely believe that it was strong enough to function, except that Renz Myer had a reputation for practicality as well as beauty. The metalwork shone, so polished it was not obvious immediately what was silver and what steel. Lishan could already imagine the harness on Ephoros, Admete's beautiful bull. The animal would look like a god.

"I don't have much call to make these," the old man said. "It was interesting."

"It's perfect," Lishan said, awe in his voice. He touched it with his fingertips, like stroking a lover. Like stroking her back, strong and supple and perfect. "You do yourself great honor."

"Ehn," the old man said, shrugging, but Lishan read regret in the bright eyes. The old man would be sorry to see his work go. Silently, Lishan took out his purse and laid the payment on the table beside the harness. It was sufficient to buy a small house near the beach. The old man sighed and took it.

"Thank you," Lishan said. "This means a great deal to me."

The old man shrugged again and nodded.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?" he asked as Lishan lifted the harness onto his shoulder. It was heavier than he'd expected.

"Yes," Lishan said, trying to shift his burden into a more comfortable position. "I need to find a package of salt."

"Lao Jizu and Clio of Erin," Admete said, leaning back in h

Pryleos said nothing, but looked out at the sand where Li Shuming w his muleta, citing the dazed, angered bull. Pryleos was the only dancer now on this side of the ring, Nikos having been hurt early in the day. It fell to Pryleos to guard Li Shuming's life, and to chaperone Admete against the anger of the Li clan. The irony seemed to chafe him.

"Chen Anyi and Helen of Daitan," Admete suggested with delighted impudence.

"The one was eight generations ago," Pryleos said. "The other, Helen of Daitan, left her estancias and never spoke to a member of her clan again."

"You said there was no precedent," Admete pointed out. "All I'm saying is you're wrong."

Pryleos sighed audibly.

"Moy Zhibin and Clymene of Boedamia," Ad

The crowd cheered as the bull on the s

Pryleos kept his eyes on the fight, but Adm on her.

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that tacit conspiracy was one of the hallmarks of a bulldancer. When Pryleos turned to head back to the stables, she walked beside him quietly.

The stables of Dairan were not well designed. The shallow rise of the seats in the arena made for low roofs, and the architect seemed in love with walls where columns would have provided the same support without such a feeling of enclosure. As they walked, Admete could hear the voices of other dancers going about their work in other sections of the place, but she only rarely saw them. Another failing of the architect—there was no natural light and the glowing orbs set into the walls and ceilings seemed to create as many shadows as they dispelled. It was as if the designer had wished to build a labyrinth, but was assigned this instead and made do. It uneased the animals and made them more difficult to handle. Admete would be pleased when the Tour moved on.

"Does my father know?" Pryleos asked.

"I assume so," Admete said. "He sent me on a fool's errand to the estancia. I didn't make a secret of Lishan's presence. If taking Zhou Lishan with me wasn't his intention . . . well, he'll know for certain when Lishan brings him the wedding gifts."

She shrugged. Pryleos frowned, paused, then turned deliberately away from their path to a darker corridor. The voices of the bulls and the bulldancers grew fainter.

"If he doesn't know, you have to go to him. Now. Before any of the others tell him." Pryleos said quietly enough that they could not be overheard. "What you did taking Lishan there was . . . dangerous seems a mild word. But if you believe in him, then I will too. For now."

Admete felt a smile blooming on her lips and fought to remain solemn. Her perfect, delightful, anxious cousin was, after all, delivering a lecture, and laughing now wouldn't be taken well.

"Phereboeus may balk at first," Pryleos began.

"Then why send me to the estancia at all?" she interrupted. "He must have known I would take Lishan with me."

"He sent you to take you away from the fighters," Pryleos said. "But I think you've done him one better. As a Zhou bride, etiquette may protect you better than we can."

"I don't want him for protection," Admete said, and Pryleos was the one to laugh.

"Cousin," he said, "of all the women I have ever known, you are the one I would expect to run to anyone out of fear."

Admete smiled, and then she was laughing too. Pryleos grinned and swept her into an embrace. She held onto him, relief she hadn't expected flowing though her. If Pryleos would accept Lishan, the whole clan would with time. It would work out.

The blow was so powerful and so unexpected that Admete thought first that she was the one who had been struck. Stunned, she let go of her cousin and he slid to the floor. His flesh was limp, and dead-looking. Li Shuming stood before her, blood from his last bull still on his hands. Their eyes met for a moment, and Admete tasted the metallic flush of panic. Li Shuming didn't run so much as flow across Pryleos' body. Admete ducked under his arms and drew a breath to scream, but the fighter's knee caught her in the belly. The air burst out of her, but not a scream.

Admete turned, driving her elbow into Shuming's wide face. The contact was solid, but he didn't hesitate. Holding her shoulder, he drove her to the

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ground and swung a knee onto her back, pressing his weight into her so that she could barely breathe. Dirt and straw dug into her cheek.

"Who did it?" Li Shuming hissed. "Who trained that bull?"

"No one," Admete said, and the weight on her back increased.

"I can crush you to death, dancing girl," the fighter said. "I can snap your spine right now. But I will let you live if you tell me."

"The bull wasn't trained," she whispered. She heard something, a low moan. Pryleos.

"No bull could best me and then be taken down by a dancer," Li Shuming said. "Don't lie to me again. Who was behind it?"

"Why can't you accept the truth?" Her voice sounded so thready, so faint it frightened her. She willed Pryleos back to consciousness, but there was no sound beyond that one, single moan. "No one plotted against you. It just happened. That's all. Accept it."

The fighter was silent.

"Why won't you accept that? Why does there have to be some deep conspiracy just because you failed?" she demanded, tears pressing out at the corners of her eyes. And then the answer to her question slid into her mind as clearly as if she was remembering something she'd already known. It was so perfect and surprising her fear left her for a moment. "You're afraid of them, aren't you? You puff yourself up with pride so that they won't see it, but you're afraid of the bulls."

She heard Shuming's sharp intake of breath. She sensed the rage bloom in him. When he struck her, it was with a vicious speed and precision. She didn't have time to feel the pain.

The salt had proven surprisingly difficult. Lishan had never thought much about the issue. Buying a normal package seemed to fit poorly with the harness, and yet what options were there for gourmet salt? He had found some packages laced with herbs, bought two, and then turned back halfway to the Montana's quarters when it struck him that the garlic and rosemary might not be to the cattle's tastes. In the end, he chose a bag of salt. It would do. It would have to do.

The Montanas were housed in an enclave near the arena, tall houses set together around a central courtyard. As Lishan left the streets behind, it seemed restful, peaceful. But walking into the wide courtyard with its low, well-kept bushes and central fountain, something began to intrude in his consciousness. It was a very faint sound, and distant. He stopped by the fountain and turned slowly. There seemed to be no one there. The doors were all shut, the windows closed. He knew from past experience that the patriarch's apartment would be through the double doors that mirrored the entrance to the street. He shifted his weight from foot to foot. He had expected someone would be there to announce him. He didn't want to break etiquette.

But he had waited too long, and if he committed some well-intentioned faux pas, Admete, at least, would forgive him for being too eager.

Lishan walked to the double doors and knocked on them twice. The strange sound was still there, like a child's inconsolable weeping heard from a long way off. He couldn't tell where it came from.

A young man, barely older than Chariboea, opened the door. His face was unreadable, blank. Lishan frowned.

"I am Zhou Lishan. I have come to speak to Phereboeus about his niece, Admete."

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This seemed to penetrate the boy's trance. He looked up at Lishan with something like shock, or perhaps fear. Or hatred. But he pulled the door open and led Lishan thorough a dark, cool hallway to the study where the Montanan patriarch stood.

"A fighter," the boy said. "About Admete." And then he vanished.

The study was not a warm room, but functional. There were few books, but brightly colored paintings lined the stuccoed walls, and potted ivy and fern softened the space. Phereboeus looked out a double window, his back to Lishan. There was a sheet of folded paper in the old man's hand. A letter. Lishan couldn't make out the seal. Admete's cousin, Pryleos, sat on a tapestry upholstered couch along the west wall. Lishan thought the man looked ill.

Pryleos murmured something that Lishan couldn't make out, but the tone was anguished.

"Phereboeus Montana, I would speak to you about your niece," Lishan began, but got no further.

"How dare you?" the old man asked, and his voice was venomous.

Lishan was surprised into silence.

"Father," Pryleos said, his voice weak and pained. Phereboeus turned, and Lishan thought he saw murder in the man's eyes.

"How dare you?" Phereboeus repeated. "What kind of idiot are you to walk into my house? How far do you think we can be pushed?"

"Father," Pryleos said again, more strongly. "This is Zhou Lishan. He doesn't know."

For the first time, Phereboeus noticed the harness on Lishan's shoulder, the white paper bag of salt he carried in the crook of his arm. The anger drained out of his face, his expression crumbling. It was like watching a wall collapse.

"We were attacked in the stables," Pryleos said slowly. Speaking seemed to hurt him. "After the last fight. It was my fault. I wanted to speak with her away from the others. I wasn't thinking."

"Li Shuming?" Lishan asked,

"I assume so," Pryleos said. "Some of the blood he left on my back was from a bull. But I didn't see him."

"It was Li Shuming," Phereboeus said. "Who else could have?"

"His cuadrilla say . . ." Pryleos began, but Phereboeus cut him off.

"They're lying. It was him."

Pryleos nodded, as if wishing he could disagree, and a tear tracked down his cheek. Lishan felt his hands begin to tremble.

"Admete . . ." Lishan said.

Phereboeus met his eyes and, slowly, the old man shook his head.

"I am sorry, Lishan. I have never been more sorry in my life. Admete is dead."

Lishan carried the muleta high, bringing the bull past him with head erect, the horn centimeters from his throat, a perfect pase de pecho. The audience surged to its feet, roaring its approval. Lishan's eyes sought Li Shuming across the ring, where the other bullfighter was watching the fight from behind the barrier.

Try this, he dared Shuming silently. *Try this and die.*

The bull was brave and full of life and Lishan brought the horns past his chest again and again. Toward the end, when he had the bull baffled, para-

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lyzed by its own failure to drive its enemy from the sand, Lishan knelt before the animal, chest out, arms thrown wide, and dared the animal to take the single step forward that could result in Lishan's annihilation.

Try this and die, he thought at Li Shuming.

Lishan killed recibiendo, tempting the bull into one last charge and then meeting it with his flying kick. As he made his triumphal progress of the ring, with the band playing and the bull's ears and tail bloody in his hands, he looked at Li Shuming and sent him the silent message: Try this and die.

"We aren't sentimental about our bulls, not generally," Pryleos Montana had said to the stunned Lishan as he walked with him from the meeting with Phereboeus. The harness dragged behind Lishan as he walked, and the bag of salt was still carried in one taut, useless fist. Lishan suspected that Pryleos was talking simply to be talking, talking because silence would have been unbearable.

"We grow to know the bulls we train with," he said, "and are often fond of them, but the rest—?" He shrugged. "They are raised wild, and we cannot know them. But Admete was different. Sometimes she'd fall in love with a wild bull—we could never tell why, what spirit she saw in one and not another."

He put a hand on Lishan's shoulder. "And then Admete fell in love with you. We didn't understand it, but when some of us saw it, we rejoiced in her love." He took the leading rein of the halter that was dragging, coiled it carefully, put it in Lishan's hand. "Be happy, Zhou Lishan. For a time you had the rarest of us all."

Try this and die, Lishan thought.

Li Shuming answered Lishan's silent dare with a perverse genius that drove the crowd to the edge of hysteria. He preened in the ring, and strutted like a fighting cock. He turned his back on the bull repeatedly, demonstrating his contempt for the animal while he cited the crowd to cheers. He dared everything that Lishan had dared, and then added his own showman's stunts—he kicked the bull contemptuously during the passes; he hacked off its horns with knife-hand swipes; when he had the bull dazed with its own inability to counter Shuming's brilliance, he knelt and kissed the bull on the nose, then leaned one hand on the bull's forehead while he casually combed his hair with the other hand.

It was only at the killing that Shuming faltered. He struck the bull repeatedly with his callused hammer hands; but somehow the blows failed to drive the bull to its knees. He called for the killing sword with its down-curved blade, but on three tries he struck bone and failed to penetrate to the heart and lungs. The bull bled silently onto the sand, its tongue hanging. Finally the puntillero, robed in black like a priest of the cult of death, was called in to sever the bull's spine with his knife.

It was as if a voice had whispered to Shuming that he would fail, and Shuming had no choice but to listen.

Lishan's second bull was weak in the legs, but before the bull could falter Lishan killed it with a spectacular leaping kick, bounding over the bull's head to crush its spine with a dropping heel.

Try this, he thought at Li Shuming. *Try this and die.*

"The police have no evidence," Pryleos had told him yesterday, when Lishan had managed to telephone him after the chaos of the Tour's moving to Heraclea. "No one saw the attack. Shuming's cuadrilla swear he was with them."

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"They need to get each member of the entourage alone," Lishan replied furiously. "Interrogate them. Make them repeat their stories until they stumble, until the lies start contradicting themselves."

If he understood this, he thought, why did the police not understand it?

"The police are in Dairan," Pryleos said. "We're in Heraclea now. By the time the police have their travel orders processed to go to Heraclea, we'll be in Gozo. When the police catch up to us, the Tour will be over, and the Li cuadrilla dispersed."

"You've got to do something!" Lishan pleaded.

"We're doing what we can."

Try this and die, Lishan thought.

Li Shuming's second bull was a wild, crazy creature, perfect for him, a red Tyree with four horns, one set curved under the other. Even to approach the bull brought Shuming into danger—he needed no art to fight this bull, and no art would have been possible, but Shuming's innate showmanship carried the crowd with him. The spectators roared at his hairbreadth escapes, and when the frenzy was at its height, Shuming went in for the kill. Again, the first time, he missed; but on his second attempt the bull dropped. The judge awarded him one ear, only because he had missed the kill on the first attempt.

Lishan's third bull was a glorious deadly creature, a black Miura. It had a way of hooking its horns to the left and made the passes dangerous on that side. Lishan fought him so close that the bull's horn scored a deep red gouge across his broad chest, and in a sudden bolt of pain carried away his left nipple. Afterward, parading with the ears and the tail and a hoof held aloft, a red stripe of burning pain across his chest, he looked at Shuming and thought, *Try this and die.*

"We must have revenge!" he had roared to Zhou Zhimo after he'd been told of Admete's death. "We must take revenge on Li Shuming!"

Zhimo stared at Lishan in complete surprise. He had already gone to bed, and looked up at Lishan from his red-and-gold brocade pillow. "What have they done?" he said. "How has the Li boy offended Zhou honor?"

"He has killed Admete Montana! Killed her with his bare hands—an ambush in the stalls beneath the ring!!"

Zhimo's bewilderment only increased. "What has that to do with us?"

Lishan fury flamed lower as the words settled into his mind. What did this business have to do with the Zhou?

"The Lis accused us of being in league with Montana," he stammered. "This is a blow at us. If we don't avenge it—"

Zhimo propped himself up on one elbow. "No," he said firmly, and then repeated, "No. Li Youwei and I came to an understanding—Zhou had nothing to do with this bull, nothing at all. Whatever remains between Li and Montana is their affair alone. If revenge is to be taken, let Montana take it."

"They aren't a fighting clan! They—"

"No!" Zhimo said. His voice rang from the hammer-beam ceiling. One calloused finger pointed at Lishan from the end of a scarred, sinewed arm. "I forbid it! You will take no revenge! This revenge is not yours to take!"

Lishan stared at his uncle like a bull balked in the ring, unable to decide which way to move. Adrenaline surged through his muscles, urging him to smash something, to break an enemy apart with his bare hands.

"I must—" he began.

"No," Zhimo repeated. His hawk eyes flared. "Whatever this girl was to

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you, you must bury it with her. There will be no war between Li and Zhou—not over a dancer." He lay back on his pillow, his hair spilling over the brocade. "Never over a dancer," he said. "I have forbidden it. You may leave."

Lishan's heart hammered in his chest as he stared for a long moment at his uncle. His hands flexed, turned into fists at the end of his massive arms.

But in the end Lishan turned in silence, and made his way from the room.

Try this and die.

Li Shuming's last bull was a colossus, a cream-colored monster that looked as if it had stepped out of prehistory. It was brave and very strong and very stupid, performing its charges just as Shuming must have wished in his dreams. The creature was like a blank whitewashed wall against which Shuming could perform his tricks, the dramatic manoletinas, the whirling chicuelinas. Lishan stared at Shuming's exposed feet and wished the bull would see them, too, but the bull was far too caught up in Shuming's game to think of such a thing.

Shuming hesitated again at the kill—Lishan saw it, as if that voice had whispered once again to Shuming of failure—but even Shuming could not fail to kill a bull so stupid as this, not once he stepped between the horns and nerved himself to try. The judge gave him ears and the tail. Shuming was carried from the ring on the shoulders of his court.

Shuming had dared and not died.

Lishan made his way to the infirmary and had his chest sewn together under a local anaesthetic. The left nipple was gone forever, but it was one of the parts he would miss the least. Later, in the inevitable interview, Zhou Zhimo went out of his way to praise Lishan's performance. "But if you go on this way you will die," Zhimo said, his voice flat. "You don't have the experience in the ring to tempt the gods in this way." Lishan saluted and withdrew.

Zhimo had not told him to stop, Lishan reflected as he left Zhimo's suite. Zhimo had only reminded him of the consequence of his daring.

He has left my death to me, Lishan thought. He has left it my choice.

Now that both the adrenaline and the local anaesthetic were gone the wound burned across his chest like a line of fire. His cuadrilla wanted to celebrate but Lishan told them he was in too much pain to join them. Instead he went to his suite and sat amid the bouquets of flowers sent by his admirers and watched through the window as the setting sun turned the sea to blood. He had two glasses of brandy, but the brandy burned in his throat like a wound.

The Grand Tour was approaching its end. Whatever was to be done, it had to be done soon.

From his room he called Pryleos Montana and asked for a meeting. An hour later he stood with Pryleos near the little harbor, watching the pleasure craft bob on the night water, strands of colored lights hung from their stubby masts. The land breeze, scented with citrus and high meadow flowers, blew strong through the open windows.

"My uncle has forbidden me to kill Li Shuming," Lishan said. "And if a Montana does such a thing, it will mean war with the Li clan, and they are better suited for war than you."

Pryleos shook his head. "I understand your uncle's position," he said. "I regret it for your sake more than for mine."

"I know how to manage Li Shuming's death," Lishan said. "You and I must cooperate to achieve it, but the blood-guilt will not be on our hands."

Pryleos gave him a sharp glance. "Yes?" he said. "Go on."

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"It will be Ephoros who takes revenge for Admete," Lishan said. "But you and I must teach him how to do it."

Several days later Pryleos drove Lishan to a compound in the middle of the night. They traveled several hours over dark, bumpy roads, climbing steadily. At last they drew up before a set of long, dark buildings with few windows. The structures looked deserted, but as Lishan stretched his cramped, stiffened legs, several young bulldancers came out to meet them, led by Chariboea. A soft, dry wind blew by Lishan, heavy with the aroma of dust. Pryleos and Lishan were taken into one of the buildings, to a dormitory lined with rows of rough-looking beds.

"We'll sleep for a few hours, then be up at first light," Pryleos told Lishan. Lishan looked at the narrow cot assigned to him and thought that Pryleos might sleep, but he would not. But either the rugged ride had tired him more than he knew, or the pallets were of better quality than they appeared, for that was his last thought before Chariboea shook him awake. The others were gone. Cool silver hues of just-before-dawn filled the room.

Chariboea showed him where the lavatories were. She waited discreetly, then led him through the back of the compound. The long buildings formed a staggered sort of courtyard. Unlike the roadside front, numerous windows punctuated the inner sides. There were more doors, too, of a variety of heights and widths. Lishan noted some very short, wide entrances, that he would have had to crawl through. He couldn't tell if Clan Coronis hosted centaurs or not, but the evidence pointed to them harboring other chimerae.

Chariboea took Lishan across the courtyard to a set of heavy oaken doors. "We'll break fast in mid-morning, when the heat starts to rise," she informed him.

Lishan looked down at her. This muted, sober child wasn't the same girl who'd guided him to Admete, who'd frolicked with the Clan Montana calves.

Past the doors, sky and stone spread vast before them. The breeze Lishan had felt the night before still blew past him, an indifferent caress. A few strange, disc-shaped striated clouds hovered above the horizon. They appeared not to be moving.

Clan Coronis' compound lay embedded in the tortuous badlands that acted as foothills to the mountains that rose between Heraclea and Gozo. The bulldancing ring here was starker than Admete's clan's enchanted meadows. In some ancient time it might have been a lake bed, until aeons ago the growing mountains had carried it up and away from its riparian beginnings. Undulating cliffs sheltered it on three sides—their colors now a warmed light-blue, but when the sun's rays finally struck, they'd glow in shades of pink, mauve, and amber. The floor of the ring was softer than the surrounding bluffs, and dusted with a layer of sand.

On one side the rock wall bowed inward. Inside that sheltered space rough seats had been laboriously chiseled, cantilevering up and back. Three young bulldancers sat there, barely clothed in their spare dancing garb, consisting of not much more than broad ribbons of silver and sapphire. An older woman sat a little apart from them. She wore a spare shift decorated with an embroidered border of interlocked complicated spirals and circles in moss green and gold.

"Is she the only member of Clan Coronis here?" Lishan asked Chariboea as he nodded toward the woman.

Chariboea looked at him with listless surprise. "She's wearing green and

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gold, the colors of Clan Erin. Clan Erin has been dancing the entire Grand Tour, alternating the fights with Clan Montana. That's Phoenissa of Clan Erin," the little girl said. "Coronis wears yellow and teal. Nobody from Clan Coronis remains here. A few are up in the alpine pastures with their stock. The rest are gone. They're letting us use their facilities, but if we're discovered," she shrugged, "they'll deny knowing we were here."

"Where did they go to?" Lishan asked.

Chariboea looked at him, her dull expression beginning to be replaced by irritation. She spread her right arm in a broad gesture that swept across and encompassed the broad hills.

"With such surroundings, Clan Coronis raises fearsome bulls. Most of the four-horned bloodlines come from here. The mountains and hills above us have been restocked with the genome of old, native predators. Perhaps you remember killing lean, savvy bulls with claw marks and other scars on their hides.

"Because their pastures are so remote, it's hard for Clan Coronis to bond their infants properly with their cattle. So very few of their bulls can be raised and trained for our dances. Most are sold straight to the corrida. As a result, Clan Coronis produces few truly great dancers. To work in the corrida, they have to travel long distances and work on humble circuits far from the Grand Tour.

"She," Chariboea jerked her head in the direction of Phoenissa, "belongs to a dancing clan as great and perhaps greater than Clan Montana."

Lishan bowed his head before Chariboea's scorn. He deserved it. Once the youngster had described the bulls from this region, he recognized them, and the name of the clan that bred them. But he hadn't recognized the name of Clan Erin, how their colors differed from Coronis'. Hell, he hadn't even noticed Clan Montana until Admete came into his life. His shame was increased, not alleviated, by the knowledge that in this he was no different than any other young bullfighter. There were other questions he wanted to ask about Phoenissa of Clan Erin, but he didn't want to insult Chariboea with his ignorance again so soon.

Tall corrals and cattle chutes were wedged into one end of the natural arena, shaded by a few giant, spreading oak trees. From behind the corrals could be heard the low, guttural chorus of a few lowing cattle. The three seated bulldancers—two women and another man—had clambered down from the amphitheater to join Pryleos near the chutes. They were oiling their bodies. Chariboea led Lishan over to them.

Pryleos smiled at Lishan and handed him a bottle. "Put this on. Then we'll warm him up before you work with him. He needs to get accustomed to these surroundings, and to stretch out a little."

Lishan was grateful for Pryleos' smile. The expressions on the other bulldancers' faces ranged from grief-stricken to sullen to hostile. While Lishan anointed himself, Chariboea climbed the thick, close-set timbers of one of the corrals and peered downward.

"The scar over the chip is healing well," she called down to Pryleos. "But will it be clean enough in time?"

"Clean enough," Pryleos assured her. "Mostly the corrida officials look at the rosettes for identification, when the bulls first enter the ring. Rarely do they bother with checking the chips, and then only if there's been some controversy during the fight. By then everybody and everything in the ring is usually so scarred that they won't notice a tear in the ear where the chip is."

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Pryleos took back the bottle of oil from Lishan. "Turn around and I'll rub this onto your back." He poured some of the ointment into his palm.

Lishan did as he was told. Pryleos' hands were efficient, pleasant but brusque. Nothing like Admete's.

"Our clans don't insert chips into our dancing stock," Pryleos' voice came from over Lishan's shoulder. "Ephoros will enter the ring as Clan Erin stock—chipped like any wild, untrained bull chosen in the sorteo."

"Not chipping your trained bulls—isn't that a dangerous practice with such valuable animals? How would you trace them if they were stolen?"

"That almost never happens," Pryleos replied. "It would be far more dangerous to risk a trained bull getting out into the world beyond our compounds, discovered for what he really is, and then traced back to us with a chip."

Good. That allowed Lishan to ask the questions he was loath to ask Chariboea. "So that's why the woman from Clan Erin is here? To give you one of her Clan's chips?"

Lishan felt Pryleos' nod through the palms of the dancer's hands. "That, and to arrange for Ephoros' transport to Gozo, hidden among the rest of a shipment of Clan Erin bulls."

Lishan glanced up at the sharp-featured woman. She caught the movement and looked down at him, unblinkingly trading stare for stare with him.

That, and more besides, Lishan guessed. He walked to the stone-hewn steps and sat below and to one side of the woman. Chariboea helped the four dancers in the arena rosin their hands and feet. Then she came to perch on the seat just above Lishan as they led Ephoros into the ring. Sad and silent though she might be, Lishan was as grateful for her company as he had been for Pryleos' smile.

Pryleos and the other dancers cartwheeled in a circle around Ephoros. The bull ignored them for a moment, sniffing the steady slight wind, taking in his surroundings. Then he spun with a slow, stately movement, following their motions. When they stopped, all at once, he was facing one of the young women.

She made a gesture as if bowing. Her head went down, neck stretching forward. Her left leg slid gracefully back directly behind her while her right leg bent deeply at the knee, taking her whole body low. The bull bowed to her in turn, then began to trot toward her. The girl paced toward the bull, picking up speed.

"That's what the calves do, when they're growing up: playing at charging," Chariboea said softly at Lishan's ear. Lishan was glad she'd decided to take pity on his ignorance.

The girl in the arena picked up speed. Just before dancer and bull collided she sprang high into the air, diving up and over the bull's horns. She came down with her palms braced at the base of Ephoros' broad neck, her legs and feet arcing up toward the lenticular clouds. But only for the briefest instant. She pushed away with her hands, launching skyward again in a tight ellipse. The second time, she landed feet first on Ephoros' hips, then one more leap—the highest yet. She spun, twisting several times, end over end. She landed on her feet behind the bull. Lishan hardly noticed her dismount. The other dancers were engaging the bull and his eye was drawn to them.

Mostly they performed spins and vaults that he recognized from the cor-

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rida, but with greater finesse and art. And joy. Lishan realized the difference afforded them by having a trained, willing animal to work with. In the bullfighting arena, with roused, nervous, essentially wild creatures, they had to cut their artistry to the bone to do their job and survive. And what joy could there be, knowing the impending fate of the animal?

Pryleos drew Ephoros' attention toward him with some back flips, then cartwheeled and cantered toward the now-cited bull. The bulldancer jumped.

Lishan's breath caught in his throat. Not high. Not nearly high enough, he thought.

But Pryleos didn't intend to leap over the bull. He grasped the two horns as he jumped, tilting up into a perfect handstand. Bull and man froze for an instant in an impeccable tableau. As Ephoros shifted his feet to move forward again, Pryleos shifted in cadence, switching his hands on the horns. His body jackknifed in a clean motion and slid, facing forward, into a riding position, high on Ephoros' back.

Ephoros trotted forward. The other dancers ran, leapt, and flipped in front of the bull, zigzagging his attention around the arena. Pryleos slid back to Ephoros' haunches. He lifted his body clear of the bull with his hands and arms, swinging his legs in a scissoring motion from one side of the bull's flanks to the other, then up and over the broad back to scissor yet again, in time with the angles the other dancers were affording him.

Lishan heard wet, labored breathing just above and behind him.

"Bravo, Pryleos, bravo!" Chariboea half cheered and half sobbed. Then her voice sank to a tearful whisper. "But still not as good as Admete. Never as good as Admete."

Soon, too soon, Pryleos halted his compatriots. He turned to look up at Lishan. Lishan sighed, rose to his feet, and descended to the arena. Now was the time for beauty to turn to revenge.

He'd brought a light carry-all with him from the dormitory. From it he unpacked a wooden sword, and two capes: the large yellow-lined capote and the small red muleta.

Zhou Lishan taught Ephoros his dance, the bullfighter's pas de deux, beginning with the large yellow-lined cape. This was the phase of the bullfight where Li Shuming would be paying close attention to Ephoros, observing the young bull's tendencies in the attack. Zhou Lishan's task was to teach Ephoros to give nothing away. For though the bull was not yet in danger at this stage of the dance, neither would Li Shuming be likely to give the bull an opportunity to strike. Li Shuming's greatest weakness—exposing his legs to the bull—wouldn't come into play here. The capote was large enough to cover the legs of even a fighter as tall and careless as Li Shuming.

Lishan introduced Ephoros to the basics of these preliminaries. Zhou Lishan started with his enemy's favorites: the manoletinas, then the whirling chicuelinas. The young bull learned quickly. His taurine intelligence grasped that there was no lovely waltz to be played at here, nothing of interest to him. He ceased to participate and just watched, barely moving. Lishan nodded to himself. So far, so good. Ephoros would appear to Li Shuming as a balky, stupid opponent. Just the kind to drive the scion of the house of Li into a tantrum of impatience and foolish, baiting showmanship.

Next, the muleta draped over the wooden sword. This work was more delicate. The obvious moment of revenge was when and if Li Shuming exposed his legs, but they couldn't rely on that. Ephoros must be ready to strike and

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kill at any opportunity. If Li Shuming thought Ephoros was stupid, he'd risk the flashy "natural." That entailed taking the sword out from the muleta so the cape was smaller and the bull had to pass the bullfighter's exposed body before reaching the muleta. Ideally Lishan could teach Ephoros to hook his horns low if Li Shuming's overweening pride led him to this fatal mistake. Ephoros must know Admete's murderer's every movement before Li Shuming even initiated it, and be there before Li Shuming. Li Shuming wouldn't be expecting that kind of behavior from the animal he'd been led to think was unintelligent and slow. The man wasn't as quick a study as the bull; Li Shuming wouldn't learn fast enough to save himself.

And if Li Shuming should dare to turn his back or drop to his knees before Ephoros, the bull must know that this was the signal to strike immediately.

By the time he finished with this initial lesson, Lishan's skin was gilded with sweat and Ephoros' hide frothed scummy white. The sun had risen to its mid-morning station. The constant breeze had turned into a hot, light wind. Lishan felt the hollowness reaching past his empty gut to shake at his bones and knew he needed to eat and drink soon. He called a halt. The bulldancers strode out into the ring to warm Ephoros down slowly. As they passed him they looked at him with curious and perhaps respectful eyes. Pryleos was the last. He nodded to Lishan with approval.

"Zhou Lishan!" Chariboea called out to him. He looked up. She'd climbed higher up the stands to sit next to the matriarch of Clan Erin. Chariboea was almost smiling. She clutched a towel in one outstretched hand. In the other, a leather bota. Lishan climbed up the seating to receive her proffered gifts. She toweled him dry while he squirted the liquid from the bota into his parched mouth. It held cool spring water, rather than wine. He wanted to gulp it down greedily. He forced himself not to.

"Can you do it?"

Lishan paused. The question came from the lean, craggy-featured woman. He nodded.

"Can you do it in time?"

Her question was reasonable. There was this two day break in the schedule of fights in Heraclea, allowing fighters to rest and recover from injuries. His uncle thought him ensconced for the duration in the courtesans' palace Pryleos had smuggled him out of the night before. After the events in Heraclea finally finished, there was an additional five day break for more rest and for the Grand Tour to travel to Gozo and settle in for the last rounds of the season.

"Yes. I believe so."

Phoenissa of Clan Erin nodded. "Good," she said. "Then we'll return here this afternoon for more work, when the sun grazes the peaks and begins to cool."

"Is it possible for Ephoros to forget his toleration of men?" Lishan asked.

In the elder's features, Lishan saw caution, sorrow, a taut control of grief and rage. I'm a tool to her, Lishan thought. She measures me as if I were a hammer she thinks to wield against a bronze door.

"Yes," Phoenissa said. "Oh, yes. There are ways, Zhou Lishan. You'll begin to learn them this afternoon."

Dreams filled Zhou Lishan's sleep that night. Dreams of dances he'd never seen: the dances the children of Clan Montana had been training for; the dances that the mature bulldancers had revealed in small glimpses today

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as they'd played Ephoros into supple receptiveness. In Lishan's dreams every dancer was Admete, every bull Ephoros, dancing the patterns he'd never gotten to see. That he should have seen.

Gozo carried its reputation as the perfect city proudly, and the final rounds of the Grand Tour were accepted by the city elders as its proper due. The wide streets around the arena were cordoned off for the throngs of spectators. Mounted policemen rode gently through the crowd, keeping peace by their presence.

Lishan had come to the arena surrounded by his cuadrilla, and the cheers from the people had been as constant and violent as a thunderstorm. He felt distanced from their excitement, as if the noise were meant to praise someone else, someone he had known long ago.

The morning had been cool with the first hint of autumn, but by the time the first bull reached the sand, the heat felt like full summer again. Lishan sat with his uncle in the open pavilion reserved for Zhou. Li was seated to the north of Zhou and Chen to the south, on display as the clans expected to take top honors in the Tour. Here, Lishan could see the whole of the arena, the sea of human faces excited by the promise of violence. And they, of course, could see him, scion of a great house lounging at ease before his trial. He hoped they could not perceive the aching weariness in his limbs or the ghosts of his anxiety.

He had stayed in the compound with Ephoros for as long as he could, teaching the beast, showing Ephoros every secret a fighter knew. Despite the blunting pads Pryleos had put on Ephoros' horns, despite the protective armor Lishan had worn for the past two days, his ribs were bruised and angry. In all his years of training he had never taken so many blows, but each time Ephoros slipped through Lishan's guard, the blow had felt like a victory.

Li Shuming had been the first to take the stand. His bull was a tawny, fast Her'si and Li Shuming fought it beautifully. Lishan watched as his enemy danced and capered, playing to the crowd. He was doing too much. When Ephoros took him, Shuming would already be tired. *If* Ephoros took him. *If* Phoenissa had managed to match Ephoros and Li Shuming.

"I will see them in the ring together," Phoenissa had said. "I owe a debt to Admete's mother, and I will pay it."

She shunted aside Lishan's questions after that. Officials, inspectors, judges, all stood in her way, but Phoenissa had promised. Lishan's stomach knotted. The choosing of the bulls was outside his control. There was nothing to be done but wait.

Lishan killed his first bull of the day with careful, workman-like skill. When he returned to the pavilion, his uncle considered him with cold disapproval. Lishan hung his head, but said nothing. The braying, rolling laughter from the Li pavilion was sharp and irritating. Lishan imagined the sound as banderillas digging at his neck.

The other fighters took to the sand in their turn. By noon, the arena was stained and spotted with blood. The presidente of the corrida signaled the first intermission and the crowds rose and flowed toward the exits. Vendors walked through the arena, their calls distant, incomprehensible to Lishan's ears. He did not see his uncle approaching until the old man's hand slapped his shoulder.

"Come," Zhou Zhimo said, and he turned, walking as briskly as his wounds allowed.

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Lishan followed the old fighter across the polished flagstone to the Li pavilion, wondering what his uncle planned.

Li Youwei sat on a thin ceremonial mat, a glass of wine at his side. There were rumors that Old Youwei's wounds had healed poorly, that infection still threaded the bone. The tendon was weak, gossip said, too weak for his career on the sands to last another full season.

Li Youwei would not quit, of course. It was assumed he would die.

"Zhou Zhimo." Li Youwei nodded his head in the barest civil bow.

"Li Youwei," Zhimo said. He gave a formal salute, fist in palm. "I have come to congratulate your son on his performance. It was admirable."

Lishan suddenly understood what was being done, and his blood shifted in his veins. He kept his face impassive, his arms loose at his sides, but a slow flush grew in his neck.

"My son would be pleased to accept your courtesy," Li Youwei said, smiling. He understood also, and he was all too happy to embrace complicity in Lishan's punishment. The old man gestured and a young boy sped off, returning with Li Shuming. Lishan heard a distant roaring in his ears. He swallowed. Li Shuming's gaze danced between the elders of the houses and came to rest on Lishan.

"The representatives of Zhou wish to deliver a message to you," Li Youwei said. Zhou Zhimo saluted Li Shuming, and Lishan followed his lead, allowing his body to react through habit. His hands were trembling and he pressed them against his thighs to still them. Be wary, Lishan told himself. Your control is less than it might be, if your hands are shaking. Save this anger until later.

"For my house, I congratulate you on your performance," Zhimo said. "Your skills are to be envied."

"My thanks," Li Shuming said. "Your words are too kind." The younger Li turned then to Lishan, expecting something, some sign or word. Lishan considered the round, soft face, the frightened dark eyes that seemed so little at home in the haughty face. Murderer, Lishan thought. Murderer and coward.

When it became clear that Lishan would add nothing, Zhou Zhimo saluted again and turned back to the Zhou pavilion. Lishan followed.

"You disgrace us," Zhimo said quietly as he walked. "One of our houses will be humiliated today. If you are still so sick at heart over that dancing girl that you cannot fight, it will be all of Zhou that suffers. You wish revenge? Here is your chance, boy. Take the sand and show the world that you are the better man. Undo what I have done. Take the pain of this correction and use it to make them bow to you this night."

Zhimo reached his seat and lowered himself into it slowly, his face betraying no pain. "Lishan," he said. "I regret that it was necessary to humiliate you. But everything rests on these next rounds. The honor of Zhou demands all of our best efforts now. Here and now. Your attention must be perfect."

Lishan bowed deeply. To the eyes of any observer, he would appear to be the proper protégé of his house taking wisdom from his master.

"Uncle," Lishan said. Say nothing more, he chided himself. Zhou honor, the honor we show our loved ones, will soon be satisfied, for I swear that if Li Shuming does not die in the ring today, he will die tonight by my hand. I swear it. "I will give the day my best effort."

Lishan returned to his seat and folded his legs beneath him, gazing out

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over the arena. He did not turn to see his uncle's face, and did not care what he might see there.

The brassy, pained blare of trumpets announced the second string of fights. The crowd was noisy, happy, excited. Lishan sat quietly, his fighter's meal of tea, bread and fruit untouched beside him.

Li Shuming and his cuadrilla of liars took the sand. Shuming saluted the judges, dedicated the bull to his father, and then, when etiquette permitted, turned to the adulation of the crowd. The trumpets blared again. Lishan felt his own breath come faster as the bulldancers came in, wearing the colors of every clan he knew, bounding around Ephoros. Phoenissa had managed it, then, managed to match Ephoros with Li Shuming. At least this much was done.

Even the crowd saw it; this was a perfect bull. Lishan mourned for him, Ephoros in his health and strength and youth. For Admete's sake, Lishan and his friend had labored together. Now the bull would die, a sacrifice made in the light of the sun, not in darkness and stealth.

Lishan watched the dancers, remembering the blanket against his skin, Admete's mouth against his. The dance was beautiful. How had he spent so many years in the ring and seen this celebration of life and strength as only a prelude? How had his vision ever been so narrow?

Li Shuming waited impatiently, wanting the focus of the crowd on him and not on the bull. The dancers did little to tire Ephoros, as little as they plausibly could. Lishan saw Pryleos among them, orchestrating their moves and whirls and then signaling them away. Never once in all the action did Ephoros' gaze stray away from Li Shuming.

Please, Lishan thought. Please, Ephoros. Kill him.

Li Shuming noticed nothing. He whirled the banderillas over his head in arcs like a juggler. He held them out, extending his arms as if to embrace the bull. Ephoros snorted, lowered his head, and charged. Lishan winced as the barb dug into Ephoros' flesh. He felt the tear as if in his own shoulders, accepted as his own the dragging burden of the weighted spear. Li Shuming spun away, untouched. He struck again with the same grace and ease. And again. When Li Shuming placed his last barb, he adopted an air of disdain. Except in the moment of the charge, Ephoros never looked away from the man.

As I showed you, brother, Lishan silently told the bull. Watch him!

Blood ran down the bull's hide, a glimmering darkness. Li Shuming called for the capote. Lishan sat forward. The moment was almost upon them. The veronica, slow as a caress and graceful as conversation. And then the chichuelina—the swirling chichuelina that invariably exposed Li Shuming's feet.

Li Shuming capered a bit, throwing kisses to the crowd, but always aware of the bull. As the crowd began to chant his name, Li Shuming whipped the cape around, the stiff cloth flaring like an angel's wing. It was a beautiful move, but meaningless. Ephoros charged, but the cape misdirected him. Twice, three times, his horns missed their mark. Li Shuming stood in the path of danger with an air of boredom that brought laughter from the audience.

Please, Ephoros, Lishan thought. Li Shuming fears you. Know it.

And then the moment came. Li Shuming spun into the chicuelina, and for a moment the cape rose from the sand. It was a matter of inches. If Lishan had not been trained to recognize its danger, he might not have noticed it.

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The same was true of the bull. With a sudden toss, Ephoros' horns lifted and Li Shuming fell. The crowd gasped, but the fighter rolled and regained his feet.

Lishan's heart sank. A vivid band of red shone just under Li Shuming's wide collarbone, and blood streaked his chest, but he stood unbowed—the injury wasn't deadly.

Ephoros turned and charged the man, not the cape. Li Shuming danced aside. Even from here, Lishan believed he could see a hesitation in Li Shuming, as if he realized something more was going on than met the eye. As if he could see the spark of intelligence in the bull. Intelligence and malice.

Li Shuming took a step back. He knew. He could not hide his fear from Lishan's eyes; every muscle spoke of it. For a moment, Lishan believed he would leave the ring, that his fear would conquer him. The plan would fail.

Don't leave, coward, Lishan thought, pressing the thought through the hot, reeking air. Stand and fight!

As if the thought had reached him, Li Shuming glanced up to the pavilions. Not at Lishan, no. At Li Youwei, his father. To him the bull had been dedicated. Li Shuming stared at his father, who had watched the house of Zhou debase itself before Li Shuming's skill, before Li Shuming's façade of courage. The crowd was roaring, inchoate and half mad. Lishan saw the fighter's wounded chest press forward, his head back, like a soldier coming to attention.

Good coward, Lishan thought. Your fear of the old man's anger displaces your fear of Admete's avenger. Good.

The showman, however, was gone. Li Shuming made another brief pass with the capote, then took up the muleta. He sought the greatest damage to Ephoros with every pass, and for all the bull's training, Ephoros was too large to escape. On the fourth pass, Li Shuming slid a perfect tiger-claw down the side of the bull's neck. When Ephoros turned again, preparing himself for the next pass, Lishan saw the bull was curling slightly into the injury. Lishan's heart sank. Li Shuming had struck deep and now Ephoros would favor that side. His movements would be more predictable. Li Shuming also noticed. His grin was vicious.

In the throng of dancers, Lishan looked for Pryleos or Chariboea, but the first familiar face he saw was Phoenissa, Matriarch of Erin. Her expression was grim.

Again, more sure of himself now, Li Shuming cited Ephoros. Again, a powerful blow to the bull's neck. Ephoros' side was sheeted with blood. Lishan felt tears begin to well in his eyes. Ephoros [illegible] weaker, his steps less sure. Li Shuming could see it. The crowd could see it. Li Shuming held his arms out to the crowd, and his hands and forearms were stained red. He accepted the deafening cheers like a greedy child. He turned slowly to accept the praise.

Ephoros flicked an ear.

"He made a mistake." Admete spoke in Lishan's memory. "Did you see it?"

Yes, my love, his heart answered. Yes.

Covered by the roar of the crowd, the bull's charge was silent. Li Shuming must have sensed it, for he turned, saw the lowered horns, and twisted away. Too late. The point of Ephoros' right horn took him just under the ribs, lifted him, and threw him forward. Li Shuming's body tumbled, broken, to the sands. Blood poured from his mouth. The muleta fluttered down beside him, gentle as a wounded bird.

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Dancers crowded into the ring, cordoning Ephoros away from his victim while Li Shuming's cuadrilla rolled his limp body onto a stretcher, weeping even as they ran for the sidelines, for the waiting medics. Death was obvious, but the crowd waited, hushed, until the doctor performed her rituals of finality. Done, she closed Li Shuming's eyes and drew a sheet over his face. The roar of the crowd rose as she bowed to the presidente.

"Zhou Lishan!" Zhou Zhimo's low voice penetrated the storm of noise and stung like a whip. "Come to me!"

Zhou Lishan stood and bowed before his uncle.

"You have created a killer. The signs are subtle but I see them. Perhaps Li Youwei is wise enough to see them as well. You have murdered Li Shuming. We are undone."

Even now, Li fighters were offering themselves to the presidente. They jostled for the honor of finishing Li Shuming's bull. In the small enclosure below the honor seats, Lishan saw his cuadrilla gathering. They had surely heard Zhou Zhimo and they waited for Lishan's direction.

"I have avenged the murder of the woman who would have been my bride," Lishan said.

"You were forbidden to see her," Zhou Zhimo said.

"I disobeyed you. In that, I am deeply disgraced. Admete loved me. In that, I am deeply honored."

"So," Uncle said. "So it is done. Face the killer you have made," Zhou Zhimo said. "I command it."

"Willingly, Uncle."

Zhou Lishan bowed deeply to his uncle. He took his clan elder's hands in his own and kissed them. It was a ritual for final goodbyes. He heard his uncle whisper, as if Zhimo talked to himself.

"I will honor the memory of Zhou Lishan. And of his bride."

Lishan turned and leaped down to his waiting cuadrilla. They shoved the wooden doors to the arena aside and prepared to follow him. Lishan motioned them back, away, his attention only on Ephoros and the dancers who guarded him. There was a scuffle in the enclosure, shouts and struggles.

"Lishan!" Chariboea, her face wet, slipped loose from the fight and grabbed at his arm. "Lishan, Ephoros must die; I know that." Pryleos, suddenly beside her, grabbed the child by the waist and tried to pull her away. "Lishan, let him die quickly," the girl sobbed. "I beg you."

"And you, Pryleos? What do you ask?"

"Dance him for Admete," Pryleos said. "Dance him well!" he shouted, as Lishan's cuadrilla pulled the young bullfighter and the child away.

The presidente would finish his deliberations with Li Youwei and his fighters in moments. There was no time left. Lishan strode alone to the center of the ring. The dancers stepped away from Ephoros. Lishan saw Montanan blue, Erin green and gold, Phoenissa's face. And then there was only the bull.

Ephoros stood at the far end of the arena, the banderillas quivering with his breath.

Li Shuming's blood darkened the bull's horns. Lishan raised his arms to the cheers and shouts of the crowd. He could hear bloodlust in the voices. They wanted vengeance. They wanted to see the bull die.

Lishan felt weightless, peaceful, disconnected from the people in the stands, from the confusion at the presidente's box. Very little of any importance was left to him now. It seemed odd to him that the prospect of his

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death should feel so profoundly like relief. A sign, perhaps, that he had not lived quite so well as he had thought. Or perhaps he felt the true essence of his training, knew at last the truth hidden in the violence of the disciplines of his art, for he embraced the coming battle as though he were already dead. Elation filled him.

Centered in the certainty of death, surrounded by marvelous distance, Lishan walked to the judges, bowed to the presidente of the corrida.

"I dedicate this bull to the memory of Admete Montana," Lishan said.

He heard a murmur ripple through the crowd.

Ephoros turned to face him. The bull's eyes were unreadable. His movements were slow and pained. There had been a great deal of blood loss, and the damage Li Shuming had done was serious. Lishan called for his capote. Ephoros shook his head, bothered by the flies that swarmed to drink from his wounds.

Come, brother, Lishan thought. Let us end this.

He held the capote, citing Ephoros as he had in their training. The bull charged, listing into his wounded side. Lishan waited, waited, then stepped to the side. He struck at one of the heavy banderillas, breaking the shaft. The barbs will remain, my friend, he wanted to tell Ephoros, but I will not have you die with your head down.

Lishan threw the weighted spear shaft aside. He spread out the capote. There was no shouting from the stands. The crowd had gone almost silent. Watch, he thought to them. Watch and learn.

Lishan wondered what the spectators made of this. Feel the bull's pain, he wished them. Watch and learn. Again he waved the capote, and again Ephoros lowered his head and charged. How easy it would be to step into that fury, Lishan thought. But they must see, bull. This once, they must see what their bloodlust asks of us. Again, he freed Ephoros' neck of one of its weights and threw it to the sand. Twice more, the beginning of the veronica, and then a banderilla removed. With each, Ephoros raised his head a little higher.

Ephoros turned, his eye following Lishan. The bull's muscles quivered, and his tail twitched nervously.

One last dance, brother. Let us show them how beautiful you are.

Lishan grinned and threw aside the cape. This motion, and the bull stepped with him. This, and he and the bull turned in a full and deliberate circle, to stand facing each other again.

"Dancing!" Lishan heard the outraged shout. "They are dancing!"

Enough, before they kill us both, brother. Lishan waved the capote in challenge. Ephoros charged, and Lishan twirled away, the cape wrapped around him like a sudden shroud—a perfect chicuelina. The crowd roared. Then two mariposas, dancing backward, the flickering cloth leading Ephoros' attention. Lishan dropped to one knee and began the series again. Then both knees. With every pass he brought the bull's horns closer. Closer. Closer. He could feel the air whistle past the points of the horns, could feel the flesh of his own neck calling for the wound. Soon. Soon, bull. You will have your revenge on me. Yes, on me, for I am the one who hurt you. I brought you here and used you against Li Shuming.

Lishan threw down the capote and gestured for the muleta. The cheering was constant now. Lishan ignored it. The aficionados didn't understand what they were seeing. They couldn't. The beauty and the power were visible only on the sand.

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"Come now," Lishan said aloud.

Ephoros charged again, and Lishan turned what could have been a hammer blow into a caress. The cheering swelled. The crowd didn't understand. Again, another pass. Again the attack made soft. A tap. A touch, and they moved away. The dance was perfect. Ephoros, even in his blood, was perfect.

Now, Lishan knew. The fight and its arc and its promise are fulfilled.

He raised his arms to the crowd. He noticed distantly that the band was playing, and wondered how long that honor had been going on. And he turned to Ephoros, citing him for the last time.

The bull snorted, twitched his ear, and charged. Lishan took two steps forward, as if to launch himself into recibiendo de patada, and then stopped. He held out the wooden sword in one hand, the muleta in the other. The crowd gasped. Someone—Chariboea, perhaps—screamed. Something like peace flooded Lishan's blood.

And Ephoros curbed his charge. The bull stopped and stood, immobile as a statue.

Lishan blinked, frowned.

The bull snorted, a sound that spoke of impatience. Ephoros turned and ambled away, still turning into his wounds. Lishan shouted, and the bull paused and looked back. Lishan waved the muleta, but Ephoros would not be cited. On another day, the crowd would have laughed, would have found the refusal comic. But there was too much blood on the sand, and the specter of death still stalked the arena. Did the crowd think Lishan had planned this? That opening himself to the bull had been some spectacular and new trick?

Again, almost desperate, Lishan cited the bull, but to no effect. Ephoros was done.

There was no more fighting.

Lishan dropped the muleta and raised his hand for the killing sword. This wasn't the ending he'd wanted, but better this than the puntillero. Lishan accepted the sword with its vicious downcurved blade. It was heavy in his hand as he walked toward Ephoros. The bull turned to watch him approach. Lishan thought he saw a flicker of curiosity in the bull's tired eyes, a wondering at this new instrument and its possible use.

Regret closed Lishan's throat and tears of sorrow and exhaustion blurred his vision. He held up the blade to the crowd. They cheered. The band had stopped playing.

Admete, he thought. Admete, love. Help me. If you can, help me.

For a moment he was in her arms again, seeing Ephoros below them in the clearing, dancing with the children and the centaurs. You and I, bull, we spent so much time training, Lishan mourned. So much devotion to waste on the plaisirs of a crowd.

He recalled then a figure, a woman, not Admete, but one of the dancers at the borrowed ring of Clan Coronis. His memory watched her bow forward. Her left leg slid behind her as her right took her weight.

Yes, he thought. Yes, love, I understand.

Again Lishan raised the sword, this time presenting it to the bull. Ephoros raised his proud and blooded neck to watch the bright metal, fascinated. With a cry, Lishan turned the blade down and stabbed it into the sand. Slowly, he pushed his left leg back and bowed to Ephoros. Now. Now, Ephoros.

Now.

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He waited for the impact of the horns, waited for the pain of certain death, thought that surely he would feel at least the vibration of the sand beneath his knees when Ephoros charged.

Lishan heard a roar, an upwelling of amazement and wonder, and looked up.

And saw, beyond the immobile sword, the kneeling bull.

Frozen time collapsed into chaos. Indulto, Lishan remembered, I must beg an indulto, but Ephoros was surrounded by dancers and there were people between Lishan and the bull, a solid wall of shouting, crazed people and the presidente was not in the stands but in the ring, shouting and laughing like a madman. Lishan found himself lifted above the crowd. He caught sight of Chariboea, murmuring to Ephoros while dancers swarmed over the bull and tended his wounds. Someone tossed a bota. Lishan caught it without thinking.

We're alive, he realized. Ephoros and I are alive. This was not planned. We were to die here.

Flowers pelted Lishan's shoulders. The arena's sands were hidden beneath the press of bodies. Hands reached up, trying to touch him. Carried on the shoulders of the crowd, Lishan struggled to stay upright, to open the bota.

To remember sorrow and sacrifice, to heed the shouts of praise and of outrage. Rumors swept the crowd even now, and heated discussions were beginning on the changes made today, made forever, in the traditions of the corrida.

To open the bota, to pour a libation, to toast my brother bull and his mistress.

To celebrate—life.

In the arena, the dance was beginning. ❍

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ON BOOKS

Norman Spinrad

WORKING THE FRINGES

DAYS OF CAIN
by J.R. Dunn
Avon Eos, $3.99

MEMORANDA
by Jeffrey Ford
Avon Eos, $12.00

THE SEA CAME IN AT MIDNIGHT
by Steve Erickson
Avon Bard, $23.00

THE SILENCE IN HEAVEN
by Peter Lord-Wolff
Tor Forge, $24.95

"The Hoegbotton Guide to* THE EARLY HISTORY OF AMBERGRIS *by Duncan Shriek"
by Jeff Vandermeer
Necropolitan Press, $7.00

More and more, as the SF genre implodes into de-energized stylization of itself and nostalgic attempted re-creation of supposed past glories, and so-called "serious contemporary literature" thrashes about in search of a viable readership, the most interesting action moves to the fringes.

To a certain extent, at least in literary rather than commercial terms, this has always been so, especially if one defines "fringes" not as the territory where the various forms, styles, genres, and levels of literature peter out, but where they interface with each other.

After all, the interface between established and codified art forms is almost by definition where the mutations, both successful and otherwise, must occur, and therefore the inevitable venue of evolution.

For example, one might argue without too much excessive hyperbole (and Brian Aldiss has) that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* interfaced the "gothic novel" with the early "scientific romance" and thus created the first true "science fiction" novel.

One might also argue that the greatness of *Moby Dick* lies in Herman Melville's use of the seafaring adventure tale to carry a weighty metaphysical meditation, a device that many a science fiction writer would later employ to good effect by transferring the Pequod, Ahab, and the quest for the Great White Whale to the starry seas of space. Mea culpa, as is well-known by literate fans of the original *Star Trek*.

Certainly Mark Twain interfaced the historical novel and the time travel story in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* and created the alternate history novel that has become such a staple of so-called "SF" today.

Just as certainly, William Burroughs, from *Nova Express* onward, knowingly applied the sophisticated stylistic tools of a stream of American fictional transcendentalism running from Henry Miller to his own much earlier *Naked Lunch* through Kerouac and Mailer and back to Burroughs again to the thematic material of genre science fiction, going so far as to write an open and acknowledged tribute to Henry Kuttner's *Fury* and a so-called "screenplay" of Alan Nourse's *Bladerunner*, the title of which had to be bought from both of them by Ridley Scott's minions to retitle the film based on Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

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It is acknowledged by all relatively intimately concerned that the true essence of the New Wave of the 1960s and 1970s, at least the original British version thereof, was the attempt to interface the most advanced and experimental stylistic tools and forms of a "literary fiction" that had long since run out of interesting and relevant things to say about dynamically evolving human consciousness and its relationship to mutating societies with a science fiction that had worlds to say about it but had ossified at about 1950 in terms of how to say it, in the hope of renovating both.

And so forth.

All of these literary mutations occurred either where extra-literary concerns caused "genres" to rub against each other, or where writers self-consciously interfaced genres, or where writers said to hell with the constraining concepts of "genre" in the first place.

Indeed, a "genre" can only be defined by its constraints, the "SF genre" being a perfect example.

Literarily speaking, science fiction—defined as fiction containing a speculative element known to be non-existent but believed to be possible—existed long before the "science fiction genre" or the term "science fiction" itself.

In this pre-genrefied form, the only constraint was literary, namely that such fiction not contain a known impossibility. For example, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was not published as a "science fiction novel" because no such "genre" then existed.

Now, of course, "Frankenstein" films and novels have long since become a staple sub-sub-genre of the science fiction sub-genre of the SF genre, and we pretty much know the characters, the story, and the outcome as soon as we read a blurb.

Hugo Gernsback created the "scientifiction" genre, defined by him as the use of pulp adventure storylines to sugar-coat scientific education of the callow masses. John W. Campbell, Jr., shattered that constraint by moving the speculative element front and center storywise and thereby redefining the genre parameters. Anthony Boucher and H.L. Gold redefined the parameters again to include a higher standard for the prose and an expansion of Campbell's mandated "scientific element" to include "soft sciences" like psychology and sociology. Michael Moorcock expanded them again in the *New Worlds* era to include style and form themselves as speculative elements.

"Genre" may be defined as a set of constraints and requirements, but the constraints and requirements, at least of an inherently mutable genre like "science fiction," shift and mutate, as creative writers and editors shatter them, and less creative writers and editors reform them again in attempts to imitate the successes thereof, sometimes succeeding, sometimes not.

As long as this remains a primarily literary evolutionary process, it is a progressive one. The groundbreaking geniuses expand the limits of the possible, and worthy writers and editors of somewhat less revolutionary talent benefit thereby, as merchant ships follow ice-breakers through arctic waters.

However, when it becomes a primarily commercially driven marketing process, as it has with the "SF" genre beginning somewhere toward the turn of the 1980s, it becomes devolutionary.

First the commercial success of *The Lord of the Rings*, published by chance as "science fiction" simply because the publisher didn't know how else to do it, created a fantasy sub-genre within the "science fiction genre."

Voilà, the "SF" genre—now in-

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cluding both science fiction, the future-oriented speculative fiction of the possible, and fantasy, its retrospective philosophical and thematic antithesis, the fiction of the forthrightly impossible—already a strictly commercially defined genre encompassing two literary opposites, and therefore utterly meaningless in literary terms.

Thence to the spin-off of the alternate history novel from the time-travel novel to its present commercial prominence, and now the "SF" genre contains three major literarily disjunctive "sub-genres": a future-and-science oriented science fiction, a magical-and-socially retrograde fantasy literature, and an alternate history genre rewriting the real past closer to the heart's desire.

This, I would contend, is Condition Terminal for the "SF genre." "SF" was once shorthand for science fiction, then for science fiction and fantasy, now for the alternate history novel as well, so at this point, "SF" no longer implies any single set of literary constraints or requirements, and is strictly a marketing definition.

But even commercially, there is no longer any such thing as the "SF readership" in terms of audience demographics or marketing thereto. The only remaining thing these diverging readerships have in common is the attendance of a small portion of each of them at the same now-very-much-so-called "science fiction conventions." And even this is largely confined to Worldcons and a few larger regional gatherings.

The "SF genre" is dead.

Long live speculative fiction.

And it will, of course. It is an impulse, a need, as old as the human race, and the human race cannot remain truly human without something like it.

As a strictly commercial publishing label encompassing a welter of sub-labels, the "SF genre" still persists, is still a "major profit center," though its market share is dropping, and will probably continue its slow decline toward extinction for another decade or so.

As a literature, or rather as a clade of literatures, speculative fiction is flourishing, though in commercial publishing terms it is operating more and more around the fringes of the "SF genre," sometimes to the benefit of the work and its writers, sometimes to the detriment thereof, as witness the five works under current consideration, their authors, and their modes of publication.

Days of Cain by J.R. Dunn and *Memoranda* by Jeffrey Ford were both published in Avon's regular Eos "SF" line. *The Sea Came in at Midnight* by Steve Erickson was also published by Avon, but in its Bard line of "literary novels." *The Silence in Heaven* by Peter Lord-Wolff was published by Tor, primarily an "SF" publisher, but in its Forge line of presently vaguely defined "crossover" novels. *The Hoegbotton Guide to The Early History of Ambergris by Duncan Shriek* (yes, that is the title!) by Jeff Vandermeer was published by a small press, Necropolitan.

What, you may ask, do these five books have in common?

Not much, by pre-1970s genre definitions. By those definitions, none of them, except marginally *Days of Cain,* is "SF."

But by the twenty-first century definition thereof, which is to say a marketing definition, all of them are "SF." All of them save the Erickson were published as "SF" in one way or another, and *The Sea Came in at Midnight* could just as well have been.

J.R. Dunn is an established "SF writer" who has published several interesting novels in the "SF genre."

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Days of Cain is as close to being science fiction by the meaningful literary definition thereof as any of these works come, provided one is willing to give time travel the usual wink and nod and honorary membership in the realm of the possible.

It is also perhaps the best novel of the group, its only major flaw being generated by the very thing that probably made it publishable at all, and certainly within the "SF genre" —the aforementioned speculative element, time travel.

Days of Cain is basically two intertwined novels.

The time travel novel is well-done, but basically an oft-told tale, in which the time police of a self-appointed transtemporal authority, herein called the Moiety, patrol the centuries and eons combating those who would tamper with history.

It's well-done, cleverly thought out, and of more than usual interest in the manner in which it indirectly depicts the advanced conscious entities running it in the far far future approaching the ultimate heat-death of the universe.

That is, until it dissolves in a groaner of a thematic climax at the end that does not at all satisfy on the sophisticated level of everything that has gone before.

The other novel is an historical novel of Auschwitz and the Holocaust, following a concentration camp inmate and a German camp guard with a developing conscience through the horrors thereof, and, in the case of the guard, all the way to his death in our present or near future.

Now I don't know about you, dear reader, but I live in Europe, and over here I've been up to my ears in Holocaust literature, films, reportage and analysis. And while it cannot be denied that the Holocaust was probably the greatest horror in a twentieth century replete with same, I approached *Days of Cain* with a certain Holocaust overload, feeling that everything that could be said about the subject had been said redundantly already.

It didn't help that in the time travel thread of the Moiety, the Holocaust is depicted as the single most pivotal event in all of human history, resonating blackly all the way up the billennial line to the aforementioned heat death of the universe.

Okay, on the evidence of the present, half a century and more after the fact, I can buy that the ghost of this massive atrocity will not be laid for centuries. But for billions of years up into a galaxy-spanning future where former human consciousness has evolved upward and onward into godlike transcendence and no longer even inhabits its original protoplasmic matrix?

However . . .

However, amazingly enough, Dunn has written just about the best novel of Auschwitz that I have ever read, not in terms of providing fresh insight, which considering how much literature on the subject has gone before hardly seems possible, but in terms of really putting you there.

Dunn has not only apparently done his homework in a thorough fashion (though I am hardly equipped to judge the accuracy of his detail on this level), he has created the universe of the concentration camp with a sensory and psychological verisimilitude that a parochial SF critic might be tempted to argue requires the "world-building" techniques of the accomplished science fiction writer.

And he has provided a new moral conundrum involving the Holocaust that both links the historical novel and the time travel novel and serves as the thematic and plot engine of *Days of Cain*.

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A group of renegade agents of the Moiety led by the charismatic Alma Lewin seek to change history to prevent the Holocaust by icing Hitler before it can begin or executing a mass-breakout from the death camps with the aid of a helicopter gunship borrowed from the Viet Nam era. Time cop Gaspar James leads the Moiety's efforts to stop them.

The question is why?

Why would anyone not want to erase the Holocaust from the time line of history, let alone the Moiety, depicted herein as a transtemporal culture led by beings so advanced that they are godlike not just in their powers but in a moral sense?

Gaspar wonders, too, even as he struggles to carry out the will of the Moiety, and the more he sees of the monstrosity that the Moiety is so determined to preserve, the less moral sense it makes.

All along the way, he is assured by ever more advanced beings that the Moiety has a good reason, and all along the way Dunn clearly depicts these beings as transcendently moral and virtuous.

It is this thematic and moral mystery that hot-wires the novel and carries the reader through the well-told tale, so the revelation of its resolution in moral terms has to be the final epiphany if this fine novel is to come to a successful closure.

And at the end, Dunn does provide the answer to the riddle.

But . . .

I hesitate here, torn between the critical stricture against giving away the thematic and plot ending of a novel structured around a kind of mystery, and critical outrage at the trivial, sloppily sentimental, and downright silly answer that Dunn provides to the deep moral question he so ably poses.

I think I shall content myself with the cryptic remark that Frank Tippler has much to answer for and leave it at that.

Except to say that because this utter failure to provide a seriously meaningful answer to the central thematic question of *Days of Cain* was caused by the time travel element that introduced it in the first place, I wonder whether Dunn might have written a better novel without it.

I wonder whether Dunn, consciously or not, wove this time travel story into what otherwise could have been a powerful historical novel of the death camps in order to be able to get this book published as "SF," because, given his track record as an "SF writer" and hence fatal stereotyping by the marketing powers that be, he might have been unable to publish it at all otherwise.

Steve Erickson, on the other hand, has never been published in an "SF" line, and has therefore never, for better or for worse, been labeled an "SF" writer, even though by literary definition his actual work is as close to speculative fiction as much of the work of certain writers who have been so stereotyped, such as Gene Wolfe, R.A. Lafferty, David Bunch, Carol Emshwiller, Harlan Ellison, and M. John Harrison, to name a random sample.

The Sea Came in at Midnight is a good example of the work of the mature Erickson, more coherent and less obscure and possessed of more story structure than, say, *Rubicon Beach* or *Days Between Stations,* but still very much literary surrealism, or, as I said earlier on, North American Magic Realism.

It is characteristic of this sort of thing, and of Erickson's work in particular, that a linear plot summary is next to impossible to provide, since this sort of fiction isn't structured linearly and isn't even story-dominant.

Say what?

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Consider the relationship between other forms of popular music and rap or hip-hop. Prior to the advent of rap, all pop music was melody and/or harmony dominant, with the lyrics following the dominant melody line, with rhythm and/or bass in the background. Rap reverses all that by bringing the rhythm up front and having the lyrics follow not a melody, which more often than not isn't even there, but the dominant beat line.

Erickson's species of literary surrealism does something analogous with fiction. Instead of following a conventional dominant plot line, it follows a dominant image-system through its non-linear skein of events, with "story" and even "character" becoming secondary.

The Sea Came in at Midnight is structured around certain modular elements. A cult which marched 1999 women off a cliff at the end of the twentieth century. The wandering girl Kristin, meant to be number 2000, who has escaped. Events, including a killing, surrounding the May 1968 student uprising in Paris. A pornographer couple. A man obsessed with an enormous calendar he has created that measures time not linearly but in terms of key chaotic events. And so forth.

Erickson uses an elegant line of prose to create a density of powerful, often enigmatic, and always obsessive image-systems strung together along structural armatures whose thematic sense or even existence is not always easy to discern or comprehend. In this he is quite close to the J.G. Ballard of the "condensed novels," the Gene Wolfe of the latter Books of the New Sun, much of R.A. Lafferty, the Michael Moorcock of all of the Jerry Cornelius cycle save *The Final Programme,* and William Burroughs, though unlike them, his obsessions change more widely from work to work.

And here, in *The Sea Came in at Midnight,* Erickson displays an impressive mastery of structure, as what starts out as the expected image-system dominant surrealism, slowly and hologrammically but in the end unerringly, brings together the seemingly disparate elements into what only in retrospect toward the end is revealed as a coherent, conventionally novelistic story.

Is *The Sea Came in at Midnight* "SF"? Well, there's a millennial death cult, a complex obsession with chaos theory and non-linear time, and, indeed, in certain countries Erickson has been published in so-called "Slipstream" lines with recognized "SF" writers.

Certainly any American SF line that published the aforementioned works of Ballard, Wolfe, Lafferty, or Moorcock—and they certainly have —could just as well have included Steve Erickson in the same list.

If Erickson had wanted to be published that way.

But why would he?

Whether by cunning career design or fortunate happenstance or a combination of both, Erickson, from his first novel onward, has always been published as a "literary writer."

This too has long since become a publishing genre, better believe it. Erickson has never had a best-seller, nor is he ever likely to if he continues along what seems to be his chosen path. Had he been published in the manner of Ballard, Wolfe, and Moorcock in "SF" lines, given a level playing field of publishing competence (something that admittedly lies squarely in the realm of fantasy), he probably would have had roughly the same sales figures he has obtained in the "literary" genre.

What Erickson has lost in not being published as an "SF" writer is therefore nothing, what he has gained in monetary terms is probably little or nothing either, and what

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he has gained in phenomenological terms is nicer covers and packaging, a better class of blurb hacks, and reviews in more culturally central journals.

But in the end he has gained a large something more—greater creative freedom. No, I am not saying that the modern SF genre is bound with sexual, political, and linguistic taboos; we fought that battle in the 1960s, the writers decisively defeated the censors, and there has been no significant retrograde counter-revolution since.

In these days of conglomerate corporate publishing and the tranching up of everything into genres by marketeers it's a lot more subtle than that.

In Steve Erickson's neck of the woods, that is, the "literary novel genre," the sales expectations are relatively modest, and the readership demographics are perceived to be an elite audience of highly educated intellectuals who will choose what books they buy on the basis of blurbs from other well-known literary novelists and reviews in literary magazines and newspapers.

In the "SF genre," the sales expectations can be anything from next to nothing to best-seller, the readership demographics are perceived, rightly or wrongly, as the contents of a Worldcon hotel writ large, a bewildering clade of specialized cults, fandoms, and media-oriented obsessives who will chose their books based upon covers that push their buttons, connection to previously successful series mediated or literary, or, for all the poor marketeers can figure out, the rolling bones of a random number generator.

So a writer like Steve Erickson has more creative freedom as a "literary writer" than as an "SF writer." It's not so much a greater freedom from contentual or linguistic censorship as it is a freedom from the pressures upon creative choice of commercial expectations and strategies faced by "SF writers."

At the dawn of the twenty-first century this is the distinction between "literary writers" and "commercial writers," between "serious" and "popular" literature.

The former are marketed to a perceived elite audience believed to be attracted to fiction perceived to be free from commercial considerations, and so they have that freedom.

The latter are perceived by the media conglomerates who control publishing to be involved in a form of show biz, where formats rule the numbers and the numbers rule the bottom line and the bottom line rules the world, and so they do not.

Take, in contrast to Steve Erickson's trajectory, two early novels by Jeffrey Ford.

The first, *The Physiognomy,* previously reviewed in these pages, was set in the Well-Built City, a fantasy land entirely disconnected from our own in time and space. Well, maybe not entirely, since in its strange mixture of magic, technology, and realpolitik, certain elements resonated imagistically with our own modern times.

Its protagonist, the "Physiognomist" Cley was a puling, self-justifying moral monster narrating the novel in first person, and the genius of the novel was that Ford made his twisted narration a perverse pleasure to read.

In the first half of the novel.

Unfortunately, long about the midpoint of *The Physiognomy,* Cley finds himself an enemy of the system, has a moral epiphany, leads a kind of revolution, and, alas, no more Mr. Not-Nice Guy, becomes a more admirable, more conventional, but much less interesting "SF" sort of hero.

I said at the time that *"The Phys-*

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iognomy illustrates both a grace and a corruption of the state of SF publishing at the dawn of the twenty-first century." The corruption being that the book illustrates the "karmic pressure" to "veer toward more conventional genre expectations . . . even in terms of setting up a possible sequel at the end, as Cley evolves toward a more conventional SF protagonist, as the gloriously and outrageously repellent sardonic wit fades away in the light of his moral reformation."

I also said that "whether there is a sequel or not will tell an interesting tale. Possibly appalling, but certainly interesting."

Memoranda is it, and it does.

Memoranda in some ways demonstrates an admirable positive evolution of Jeffrey Ford as a writer. Unfortunately it also demonstrates the negative commercial pressures exerted by genre parameters on the work of such a writer when it is published as "SF."

Cley narrates in first person once more, but in *Memoranda* his voice is a pale shadow of what it was in the first half of *The Physiognomy*. Drachton Bellow, the former dictator of the Well-Built City, which now lies in ruins, is once again the antagonist.

Well, sort of. Bellow is still a power, but he has fallen into a kind of coma, and Cley's task is to descend into his "memory palace" via psychedelic drugs to find the antidote to the plague that Bellow released on innocents but that ended up putting him into a coma-unto-death as well.

In medieval Europe, the "memory palace" was a mnemonic technique apparently imported from China whereby one built an imaginary palace in one's mind, each architectural detail, each piece of furniture, each item of decor, standing for a bit of data one wanted to remember. To retrieve the data, one mentally entered the memory palace, walked around in it, and read it off the visually coded artifacts. Something like a virtual analog computer in your head.

In *Memoranda,* thanks to magic or science or whatever you want to call it, Bellow has carried the idea much further. His memory palace is a full analog, metaphorical, imagistic, model of his entire psyche. Moreover, this virtual world is inhabited by virtual people who don't know that their pocket universe is virtual, who don't know that they are virtual, who have inner lives to the point where one of them can fall in love with Cley and he with her.

If this seems reminiscent of Philip K. Dick's *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch,* with its struggling virtual god of drug reality, and *Ubik,* with its half-life dream-world denizens and would-be redeemer Runciter, well, it is, and not bad company either.

But Ford carries it a bit further and in quite a different direction and therein lies both the strength and the weakness of *Memoranda*.

Bellow's memory palace is a metaphorical model of his entire psyche—conscious, unconscious, and everything between—so that the pocket universe thereof is a surreal virtual reality, a dream world made manifest, operating along imagistic lines of logic, much like the work, especially the earlier work, of Steve Erickson.

But *Memoranda* is an "SF" novel published in an "SF genre" line, where there still remains a tropism to give logical rational explanation even to surreal skeins of events, to connect the dream world operating on imagistic logic to the so-called "real world" operating on causal logic.

This at once makes writing surreal science fiction more difficult than writing what can only lamely be termed surrealistic mainstream fic-

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tion and the result more powerful when it is carried off successfully.

And one of the central themes and McGuffins of *Memoranda* is this very connection between the surreal world of Bellow's memory palace and the external phenomenological reality it encodes and Cley's struggles to decode it.

Surreal or not, in literary terms, this is the sort of thing that only science fiction does, the sort of thing that only science fiction can do, distilled essence of what makes science fiction science fiction.

However . . .

However, *Memoranda* is a sequel to *The Physiognomy* and most of what the surreal world of Drachton Bellow's memory palace encodes is events from the previous novel, so that unless you have read the first book, the imagistic reality thereof does not resonate with any outside reality at all, and most of the effect is lost. When an imagistic reality refers to a reality with which we are familiar, it can illuminate it. When all that it refers to is another fictional universe in a book we haven't read or don't vividly remember, it falls pretty flat.

There's a certain arrogance in this sort of thing, and paradoxically also a certain pathetic commercial desperation.

The arrogance lies in the assumption that the first book lives so vividly in the readers' own memory palaces that a second book that requires such vivid memory to work will succeed.

The pathetic commercial desperation lies in the willingness by the publisher and/or writer to limit the potential satisfiable readership of the second book to those who have already read the first. And tough shit to the readers who buy the second book without realizing that it is a sequel.

There is something not only sad about this but immoral, for it is a prime example of the corruption of literary values by commercial ploys that are not only cheats but in the end commercial self-defeating cheats. That is the essence of what "genre" has become.

And it gets worse.

Much worse.

Take *The Silence in Heaven* by Peter Lord-Wolff.

As near as I can tell, this seems to be a first novel, or at least a first "SF genre" novel, albeit published by Tor, paradoxically enough, under its Forge imprint, supposedly used for non-SF-genre books, but herein revealing perhaps that its definition thereof is less a matter of literary "breakout" or "crossover," than a mode of attempting to break books out of the limits of genre SF marketing parameters and sales figures.

For if *The Silence in Heaven* isn't "SF" by current twenty-first century definition, then what the hell is?

The protagonist, Tashum, is an angel. Literally. One of a group of angels kicked out of heaven by a vaguely understood, and not overtly Biblical, god for reasons he doesn't comprehend to wander the Earth for millennia in search of his "brother angel" Paladin and a way back home.

These are very peculiar angels, and this is a very peculiar novel. Although Tashum has been dewinged, for reasons never made clear, other of these fallen angels remain fully equipped. Their ejection takes place deep in human prehistory and they are immortal, but they can be hurt, badly hurt, and their bodies take time to heal. And it turns out they can be killed under certain circumstances.

And their golden blood cures humans of almost anything.

At the price of turning them into vampires.

We follow Tashum from his fall

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into a primitive tribe on an isle that will one day be called Bermuda all the way up to the present or even the near future, the story centered on his discovery of and adaptation to evolving human societies, his ambiguous relationship to the immortal vampires he has created, Fanny and Dickey, and his quest for Paladin and a return to heaven.

Fantasy?

Yes and no.

Angels and vampires and falls from heaven would seem to be the material of fantasy, but the unique fascination of *The Silence in Heaven* lies in the way Lord-Wolff treats the whole story as science fiction.

His angels, and Tashum in particular, are rendered not so much as celestial beings but as aliens trapped on a strange planet. When Tashum is gravely wounded, more often than once, his "miraculous" recoveries are described not in terms of magic but of his alien physiology. Lord-Wolff's angels have crystal skeletons, one of which is discovered in a curio shop. When he gets to the present, Tashum even sends a sample of his blood to a lab for analysis.

What is more, much more, Lord-Wolff very realistically describes the pragmatic problems of an angel falling naked to Earth, dealing with a primitive tribe, then eighteenth and nineteenth century England, down to the need to steal clothes and adapt to the stylistic modes as they change.

Not to mention making money. Which Tashum learns how to do very well indeed down through the ages, so that by the time he reaches the present, he's got zillions, rides around in a Rolls, has mansions all over the place, and a very fancy yacht.

Further, the climactic sequences of *The Silence in Heaven* involve him in James-Bond-like battles and chases with seaplanes, helicopters, sophisticated weaponry, and computer hackery.

Not science fiction?

Maybe you could make a half-baked argument.

Not "genre SF"?

Who are you kidding?

If a description of Lord-Wolff's material and his literary angle of attack do not convince you that this is genre SF, Forge imprint or not, the "conclusion" of *The Silence in Heaven* drives it home with brutal commercial force.

"Conclusion" with quotes because there isn't any.

Understand that this is a rather long (384 pages) novel published in hardcover to sell for $24.95. Understand too that it is a novel written by someone entirely unknown, at least to an "SF" audience.

Understand too that it is well written, very carefully thought out and realized, and well-structured and plotted too, until it descends to the Bondish silliness of its slam-bang action ending.

Understand that what the narrative tension is based upon, what holds the whole thing together, is Tashum's quest for Paladin, his passion to return to heaven, and the questions that obsess him for millennia and the reader for a 384 page book:

Why was he thrown out of heaven?

What really happened to Paladin?

What is the metaphysical nature of this whole set-up?

Will Tashum ever get back to heaven?

What will "God" be like when he gets there?

And at the dramatic conclusion—

None of these questions are answered.

You'll have to fork over for the sequel to find out. Or book three. Or twelve. Or maybe the TV series.

This, I submit, is something that

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no one would try to get away with outside of genre publishing—a long hardcover novel by an unknown that leaves readers hanging in mid-air. This is a structure that, on literary grounds, no editor should ever have accepted. This is the unsavory morsel on the end of the genre fork. It not only cheats readers, it stunts the growth and development of the writer and warps his literary integrity.

Thus the terminal state of the "SF genre" at the turn of the twenty-first century. That's the bad news.

The good news is that an optimist might argue that this is the way things usually look on the cusp of a paradigm shift. The center hollows out, the action moves to the periphery, the smart rats leave the sinking ship, there is a period of chaos, and something new gets busy being born while something old is busy dying.

It is interesting to note that over the past decade or so many writers with non-genre literary credentials have turned to the writing of what in literary terms can only be called science fiction or at the least speculative fiction—John Updike, Don DeLillo, Steve Erickson himself, Margaret Atwood, to name a random sample.

It is even more interesting to note how in the past few years rising stars of genre SF have been segueing out of SF genre publishing—William Gibson, Neal Stephenson, Jonathan Lethem, to name a prominent non-random sample of the best and the brightest—as soon as they can. No doubt more would be doing so if they could, and will if they can.

This at a time when both publishing and the very nature of the "book" are beginning to undergo a radical phase change.

Certainly within the next decade and probably within a year or two we will see a universal electronic book reader selling for under three hundred dollars doubling as a mobile phone and capable of downloading books from a plethora of publishing web sites, storing them on removable media, and displaying them on good screens.

This will not merely change the nature of reading, writing, and publishing more than anything since the invention of the printing press, it will be as radical as the shift from clay or wax tablets to paper.

It is ridiculous to suppose that the "SF genre" as such—with its stylized packages, tightly defined readership demographics, fandom, conventions, and specialty lines—will survive this transition in a form that Hugo Gernsback, John W. Campbell, or contemporary SF fans themselves would recognize.

Almost as ridiculous as imagining that "mimetic contemporary literary fiction" can possibly maintain a readership or connection with the zeitgeist on the other side of this divide by continuing to focus on attempts to illumine an immediate "present" mutating faster than it can be written about by retrograde reference to a past from which it is receding at an ever-accelerating rate.

The times, they are a-changing.

On the other hand, it may be comforting for lovers of the book-as-artifact and utterly non-commercial labor of love to note that, whatever changes the technology brings, there will probably always be room around the fringes for utterly sui generis weirdnesses like *The Hoegbotton Guide to The Early History of Ambergris by Duncan Shriek* by Jeff Vandermeer simply because they are sui generis.

This eighty-four page pamphlet published by Necropolitan Press (whatever that is) is the ultimate example of book-as-artifact and a work of fiction unlike any I have ever encountered.

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It purports to be an overview of the early history of an entirely imaginary city set in an entirely imaginary world commissioned by the fictional Hoegbotton Publishers as a guide for tourists, but written for money by the querulous, score-settling, sardonic academic historian thereof, Duncan Shriek, who lards the text with a superabundance of footnotes, many of which are whole sidebar mini short stories themselves.

Necropolitan Press goes so far with this that instead of listing its other publications in the back of the book, the last page promotes The Hoegbotton Ambergris Pamphlet Series as well as The Hoegbotton Southern Cities Pamphlet Series, and such is the puissance of Vandermeer's wonderful piece of baroque Vance-like madness that you not only wish you could go to the "Borges Bookstore" and buy them, you know what their bizarre titles mean.

This is the sort of thing that reminds us that while publishing modes, genres, literary schools and styles, and even the material matrices in which literature is encoded, come and go, there is a restorative impulse, a literary innocence, that transcends the maya thereof, that has not died yet, that remains eternal.

Eternal because it generates literature that is written entirely for fun, without the slightest nod to the shrewdities of careerism. Eternal because it causes literary Don Quixotes to publish it for love, not money.

It restoreth the soul.

It giveth hope. ○

Sigh
"When you wish upon a star, makes no difference who you are: 'cause stars are only vast atomic fires incapable of caring or even knowing you're there"
6-4-99

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SF Conventional Calendar

The autumn convention season builds toward a climax in the month of September. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs and on how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. - Erwin S. Strauss

SEPTEMBER 2000

15–17—**Arcana.** For info, write: **Box 6036, Lake St. Stn., Minneapolis MN 55408.** Or phone: **(612) 721–5959** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: St. Paul MN (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Holiday Inn Bandana Sq. Guests will include: David Drake. Horror convention.

16–23—**Viable Paradise. (E-mail) mvsfa@juno.com.** Island Inn, Martha's Vineyard MA. M. McHugh. Writers' workshop.

22–24—**Ditto. (612) 823–1497. (E-mail) kaden@alum.mit.edu.** Dallas TX Galleria area. For traditional fanzine fans.

22–24—**ConChord. (E-mail) conchord@sundry.hsc.usc.edu.** Airtel Plaza, Van Nuys CA. The Bonhoffs. SF folksinging.

22–24—**GateCon. (719) 574–6427.** Radisson. **(E-mail) barbmh@aol.com,** Burnaby BC. T. Rothery, Don D. Davis. Media.

22–24—**StarCon. (303) 757–5850. starland@starland.com. (Web) starland.com.** Denver CO. Commercial media con.

22–24—**Oxonmoot. (E-mail) oxonmoot@tolkiensociety.org. (Web) tolkiensociety.org.** Oxford UK. J. R. R. Tolkien.

28–Oct. 1—**Twilight Terrors, Box 1582, N. Riverside IL 60546. (Web) twilight-terrors.com.** O'Hare Ramada, Chicago IL.

29–Oct. 1—**Archon, Box 8387, St. Louis MO 63132. (636) 326–3026.** Gateway Center, Collinsville IL. Niven, Pournelle.

29–Oct. 1—**ConText, Box 163391, Columbus OH 43216. (614) 851–9977. (Web) contextcon.com.** Best Western. Written SF.

29–Oct. 1—**TrinocCon, Box 10633, Raleigh NC 27605. (Web) trinoc-con.org.** Marriott Downtown, Durham NC. Swanwick.

29–Oct. 1—**Filk Continental, c/o Dröge, Wielandstr. 28, Hamburg D–22089, Germany. (Web) filk.de.** SF folksinging.

29–Oct. 1—**SachsenCon, c/o Biewald, Otto-Nagel-Str. 50, Hoyerswerda D–02977, Germany. (03571) 414–876.** Leipzig.

30—**Fringe Media, 1760 Gross Rd., Dallas TX 75228. (E-mail) jpowers@cotwr.com.** Deep Ellum Center. Horror media.

30–Oct. 1—**Trek Celebration, 11916 W. 109th #125, Overland Park KS 66210. (913) 327–8735.** Charlestown WV. Media.

30–Oct. 1—**Masquerades, 6 Meadow Ln., Sleaford NG34 8LL, UK. (0159) 303–786.** Nottingham UK. Beauty & the Beast.

OCTOBER 2000

6–8—**AlbaCon, Box 2085, Albany NY 12220. (518) 456–5254. rothman@sff.net.** Ramada, Schenectady NY. G. Cook.

6–8—**ValleyCon, Box 7202, Fargo ND 58106. (701) 241–7654. (E-mail) valleycon@hotmail.con.** Quality Inn.

6–8—**ElsterCon, c/o Räuschel, Sternwartenstr. 53, Leipzig 04103, Germany.** Haus des Buchs. G. R. R. Martin, Simmons.

6–8—**FarPoint, 6099 Hunt Club Rd., Elkridge MD 21075. (410) 579–1257.** Marriott, Hunt Valley MD. Katsulas. Trek, B5.

6–8—**Maquis Gras, Box 1101, Portage IN 46368. (219) 759–2272. (E-mail) bejen@maquis.com.** Ramada. B. March. Trek.

6–8—**Anime Weekend, Box 13544, Atlanta GA 30324. (404) 364–9773. awa@anime.net.** Crowne Plaza Ravinia. Lewis.

6–8—**AniMagic, Box 10052, Lancaster CA 93584. (E-mail) info@ani-magic.org.** Antelope Valley Best Western. T. Yoshida.

6–9—**GaylaxiCon, 517 N. Ripley, Alexandria VA 22304. (703) 567–8530.** Hilton, Arlington VA. Gay fans and their friends.

13–15—**ICon, Box 525, Coralville IA 52244. (319) 626–2099. (E-mail) icon@sflis.org.** Ramada Westfield. H. Turtledove.

13–15—**ConCept/Boréal, Box 405, Stn. H, Montreal PQ H3G 2L1.** Days Inn Metro-Centre. Charles de Lint. Bilingual con.

13–15—**VulKon, Box 297122, Pembroke Pines FL 33029. (954) 441–8735. joemotes@aol.com.** Cleveland OH. Trek.

13–15—**Nan Desu Con, 1552 Monroe, Denver CO 80206. genkidenki@hotmail.com.** Sheraton, Lakewood CO. Anime.

13–16—**Starman Family Con, 16563 Ellen Springs Dr., Lower Lake CA 95457. (707) 995–1228.** Hollywood CA.

13–16—**Sci Fi Sea Cruise, Box 936135, Margate FL 33063. (800) 683–7477x77260.** MS Ryndam, from Vancouver south.

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NEXT ISSUE

DECEMBER COVER STORY

Multiple Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy Award-winning author **George R.R. Martin** returns to these pages next issue with a vivid and gorgeously colored new novella set in the evocative universe of his bestselling novels *A Game of Thrones* and *A Clash of Kings*, a novella which takes a fiery young Queen and her company of friends, bondsmen, scheming courtiers, and mythological monsters down a long and twisting road full of adventure and battle, horror and beauty, intrigue and betrayal, loyalty and love, and death and rebirth, as they follow "The Path of the Dragon." This is pure entertainment at its finest, and one you will not want to miss! The evocative cover is by Hugo-winning artist **Bob Eggleton**.

OTHER TOP-FLIGHT WRITERS

Hugo and Nebula-winner **Mike Resnick** takes us slumming with an American Icon in nineteenth century London, and demonstrates that even Teddy Roosevelt can find the riding a bit *too* rough in the mean streets and haunted alleys of "Redchapel"; **M. Shayne Bell** sends a contemporary man to a strange and melancholy high-tech future, one where almost everything he knew or loved has been lost, and where he learns the real price of the "Balance Due"; new writer **Cory Doctorow** joins forces with new writer **Michael Skeet** (making his *Asimov's* debut) to give us a compelling picture of what it's like to be swept up in a violent (and bizarre) revolution in a land that's not your own, in the inventive and powerful "I Love Paree"; and **Richard Parks** returns after a long absence with a bittersweet study of the various kinds of ghosts that can come to haunt a person's life, and how hard it can be to get *rid* of some of them, in the eloquent story of "The God of Children."

Don't worry. We haven't forgotten that it's Christmastime. As usual, by long tradition, we're bringing you a Christmas Story in the December issue as well. *This* year, it's by the popular and prolific **Kage Baker**, who spins an odd and poignant kind of Christmas Ghost Story, one in which she bids us a "Merry Christmas from Navarro Lodge, 1928"—and invites us in for an evening you may never forget!"

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column takes a look at "The Grand Masters"; and **Paul Di Filippo** brings us "On Books"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our December issue on sale on your newsstand on November 21, 2000, or subscribe today (you can also subscribe online, at our *Asimov's* Internet website, at *http://www.asimovs.com*), and be sure that you miss none of the great stuff we have coming up for you **next** year!

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great new stories by **Allen Steele**, **Bruce Sterling**, **Kage Baker**, **Robert Reed**, **Tom Purdom**, and many others.

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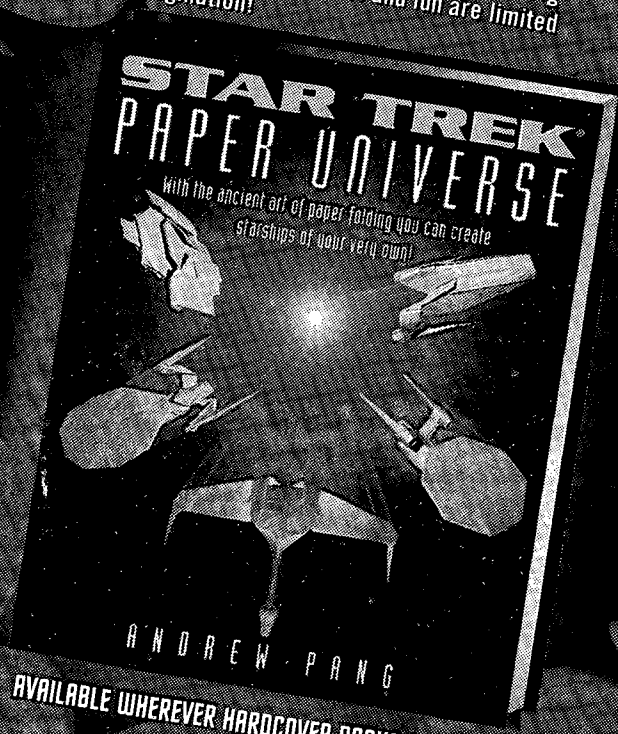

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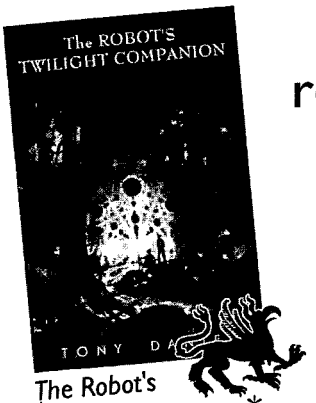
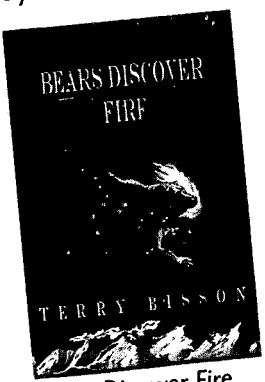
No Enemy But Time
By Michael Bishop

Beast of the Heartland
By Lucius Shepard

Unicorn Mountain
By Michael Bishop



The Robot's
Twilight Companion*
By Tony Daniel



Bears Discover Fire
By Terry Bisson

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